BEST ALL-TIME MYSTERY FICTION

ANC

Verdict

JULY
35 cents

All At Once, No Alice
by
CORNELL WOOLRICH

Plus — NERO WOLFE *in* "FER-DE-LANCE" *by* REX STOUT
BRUNO FISCHER, HENRY KANE, DOROTHY B. HUGHES

VOL. 1 • NO. 2

Verdict

JULY 1953

CONTENTS

SERIAL

Page

FER-DE-LANCE (A Nero Wolfe Mystery), Part II
by Rex Stout 93

NOVELETTES

KUDOS FOR THE KID (A Peter Chambers' Novelette)
by Henry Kane 55

ALL AT ONCE, NO ALICE
by Cornell Woolrich 1

SHORT STORIES

THE MAN WHO LOST HIS HEAD
by Bruno Fischer 122

HOMECOMING
by Dorothy B. Hughes 45

THE STRIPPER (A Lieutenant Marshall Story)
by H. H. Holmes 35

HAS ANYBODY HERE SLAIN KELLY? (A Joe Masters Story)
by Francis Lewis 69

REVENGE
by Samuel Blas 87

SUICIDE
by Frank Kane 137

JOHN McCLOUD, *Editor* — E. A. TULMAN, *Managing Editor*
CHAS. W. ADAMS, *Art Director* — R. E. DECKER, *Business Manager*

VERDICT Published monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc. (an affiliate of St. John Publishing Co.) at 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. Copyright, 1953 by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form. Single copy 35¢. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada $4.00; other countries $5.00. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but will assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U.S.A. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental.

all at once, NO ALICE

The Justice of the Peace saw her. The hotel clerk saw her. But by morning they insisted she didn't exist.

A Novelette

BY CORNELL WOOLRICH

IT WAS over so quickly I almost thought something had been left out, but I guess he'd been doing it long enough to know his business. The only way I could tell for sure it was over, was when I heard him say: "You may kiss the bride." But then, I'd never gone through it before.

We turned and pecked at each other, a little bashful because they were watching us.

He and the motherly-looking woman who had been a witness — I guess she was his housekeeper — stood there smiling benevolently, and also a little tiredly. The clock said one-fifteen. Then he shook hands with the two of us and said, "Good luck to both of you," and she shook hands too and said, "I wish you a lot of happiness."

We shifted from the living room where it had taken place, out into the front hall, a little awkwardly. Then he held the screen door open and we moved from there out onto the porch. The air was sweet.

On the porch step Alice nudged me and whispered, "You forgot something."

I didn't even know how much I was supposed to give him. I took out two singles and held them in one hand, then I took out a five and held that in the other. Then I went back toward him all flus-

Copyright 1940 by Popular Publications Inc.

tered and said, "I — I guess you thought I was going to leave without remembering this."

I reached my hand down to his and brought it back empty. He kept right on smiling, as if this happened nearly every time too, the bridegroom forgetting like that. It was only after I turned away and rejoined her that I glanced down at my other hand and saw which it was I'd given him. It was the five. That was all right; five thousand of them couldn't have paid him for what he'd done for me, the way I felt about it.

We went down their front walk and got into the car. The lighted doorway outlined them both for a minute. They raised their arms and said, "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, and much obliged," I called back. "Wait'll they go in," I said in an undertone to Alice, without starting the engine right away.

As soon as the doorway had blacked out, we turned and melted together on the front seat, and this time we made it a real kiss. "Any regrets?" I whispered to her very softly.

"It must have been awful before I was married to you," she whispered back. "How did I ever stand it so long?"

I don't think we said a word all the way in to Midcity. We were both too happy. Just the wind and the stars and us. And a couple of cigarettes.

We got to the outskirts around two thirty, and by three were all the way in downtown. We shopped around for a block or two. "This looks like a nice hotel," I said finally. I parked outside and we went in.

I think the first hotel was called the Commander. I noticed that the bellhops let us strictly alone; didn't bustle out to bring in our bags or anything.

I said to the desk man, "We'd like one of your best rooms and bath."

He gave me a sort of rueful smile, as if to say, "You should know better than that." . . . "I only wish I had something to give you," was the way he put it.

"All filled up?" I turned to her and murmured, "Well, we'll have to try some place else."

He overheard me. "Excuse me, but did you come in without making reservations ahead?"

"Yes, we just drove in now. Why?"

He shook his head compassionately at my ignorance. "I'm afraid you're going to have a hard time finding a room in any of the hotels tonight."

"Why? They can't all be filled up."

"There's a three-day convention of the Knights of Balboa being held here. All the others started sending their overflow to us as far back as Monday evening, and our own last vacancy went yesterday noon."

The second one was called the Stuyvesant, I think. "There must

be something, in a city this size," I said when we came out of there. "We'll keep looking until we find it."

I didn't bother noticing the names of the third and fourth. We couldn't turn around and go all the way back to our original point of departure — it would have been mid-morning before we reached it — and there was nothing that offered suitable accommodations between; just filling stations, roadside lunchrooms and detached farmsteads.

Besides, she was beginning to tire. She refused to admit it, but it was easy to tell. It worried me.

The fifth place was called the Royal. It was already slightly less first-class than the previous ones had been; we were running out of them now. Nothing wrong with it, but just a little seedier and older.

I got the same answer at the desk, but this time I wouldn't take it. The way her face drooped when she heard it was enough to make me persist. I took the night clerk aside out of her hearing.

"Listen, you've got to do something for me. I don't care what it is," I whispered fiercely. "We've just driven all the way from Lake City and my wife's all in. I'm not going to drag her around to another place tonight."

Then as his face continued impassive, "If you can't accommodate both of us, find some way of putting her up at least. I'm willing to take my own chances, go out and sleep in the car or walk around the streets for the night."

"Wait a minute," he said, hooking his chin. "I think I could work out something like that for you. I just thought of something. There's a little bit of a dinky room on the top floor. Ordinarily it's not used as a guest room at all, just as a sort of storeroom. You couldn't possibly both use it, because there's only a single-width cot in it; but if you don't think your wife would object, I'd be glad to let her have it, and I think you might still be able to find a room for yourself at the Y. They don't admit women, and most of these Knights have brought their wives with them."

I took a look at her pretty, drawn face. "Anything, anything," I said gratefully.

He still had his doubts. "You'd better take her up and let her see it first."

A colored boy came with us, with a passkey. On the way up I explained it to her. She gave me a rueful look, but I could see she was too tired even to object as much as she felt she should have. "Ah, that's mean," she murmured. "Our first night by ourselves."

"It's just for tonight. We'll drive on right after breakfast. It's important that you get some rest, hon. You can't fool me, you can hardly keep your eyes open any more."

She tucked her hand consolingly under my arm. "I don't mind if you don't. It'll give me something

to look forward to, seeing you in the morning."

The bellboy led us along a quiet, green-carpeted hall and around a turn, scanning numbers on the doors. He stopped three down from the turn, on the right-hand side, put his key in.

"This is it here, sir." The number was 1006.

The man at the desk hadn't exaggerated. The room itself was little better than an alcove, long and narrow. I suppose two could have gotten into it; but it would have been a physical impossibility for two to sleep in it the way it was fitted up. It had a cot that was little wider than a shelf.

To give you an idea how narrow the room was, the window was narrower than average, and yet not more than a foot of wall-strip showed on either side of its frame. In other words it took up nearly the width of one entire side of the room.

I suppose I could have sat up in the single armchair all night and slept, or tried to, that way; but as long as there was a chance of getting a horizontal bed at the Y, why not be sensible about it? She agreed with me.

"Think you can take this, just until the morning?" I asked her and the longing way she was eyeing that miserable cot gave me the answer. She was so tired, anything would have looked good to her right then.

We went down again and I told him I'd take it. I had the bellboy take her bag out of the car and bring it in, and the desk clerk turned the register around for her to sign.

She poised the inked pen and flashed me a tender look just as she was about to sign. "First time I've used it," she breathed. I looked over her shoulder and watched her trace *Mrs. James Cannon* along the lined space. The last entry above hers was *A. Krumbake, and wife.* I noticed it because it was such a funny name.

The desk clerk had evidently decided by now that we were fairly desirable people. "I'm terribly sorry I couldn't do more for you," he said. "It's just for this one night. By tomorrow morning, already, a lot of them'll be leaving."

I went up with her a second time, to see that she was made as comfortable as she could be under the circumstances. But then there was nothing definitely wrong with the room except its tininess, and the only real hardship was our temporary separation.

I tipped the boy for bringing up her bag, and then I tipped him a second time for going and digging up a nice, fluffy quilt for her at my request — not to spread over her but to spread on top of the mattress and soften it up a little. Those cots aren't as comfortable as regular beds by a darned sight. But she was so tired I was hoping she wouldn't notice the difference.

Then after he'd thanked me for the half-buck he'd gotten out of it,

and left the room, I helped her off with her coat and hung it up for her, and even got down on my heels and undid the straps of her little sandals, so she wouldn't have to bend over and go after them herself. Then we kissed a couple of times and told each other all about it, and I backed out the door.

The last I saw of her that night she was sitting on the edge of that cot in there, her shoeless feet raised to it and partly tucked under her, like a little girl. She raised one hand, wriggled the fingers at me in good-night as I reluctantly eased the door closed.

"Until tomorrow, sweetheart," she called gently, when there was a crack of opening left.

"Until tomorrow."

The night was as still around us as if it were holding its breath. The latch went *click*, and there we were on opposite sides of it.

The bellboy had taken the car down with him just now after he'd checked her in, and I had to wait out there a minute or two for him to bring it back up again at my ring. I stepped back to the turn in the hall while waiting, to look at the frosted door transom over her door; and short as the time was, her light was already out. She must have just shrugged off her dress, fallen back flat, and pulled the coverings up over her.

Poor kid, I thought, with a commiserating shake of my head. The glass elevator panel flooded with light and I got in the car. The one bellhop doubled for liftman after twelve.

"I guess she'll be comfortable," he said.

"She was asleep before I left the floor," I told him.

The desk man told me where the nearest branch of the Y was, and I took the car with me as the quickest way of getting over there at that hour. I had no trouble at all getting a room, and not a bad one at that, for six bits.

I didn't phone her before going up, to tell her I'd gotten something for myself, because I knew by the way I'd seen that light go out she was fast asleep already, and it would have been unnecessarily cruel to wake her again.

I woke up at eight, and again I didn't phone her, to find out how she was, because in the first place I was going right over there myself in a few more minutes, and in the second place, I wanted her to get all the sleep she could before I got there.

I even took my time, showered and shaved up good, and drove over slowly, to make sure of not getting there any earlier than nine.

It was a beautiful day, with the sun as brand-new looking as if it had never shone before, was just being broken in; and I even stopped off and bought a gardenia for her to wear on the shoulder of her dress. I thought: I'll check her out of that depressing dump. We'll drive to the

swellest restaurant in town, and she'll have orange juice and toast while I sit looking at her face.

I braked in front of the Royal, got out and went in, lighting up the whole lobby the way I was beaming.

A different man was at the desk now, on the day shift, but I knew the number of her room so I rode right up without stopping. I got out at the tenth, went down the hall the way he'd led us last night — still green-carpeted but a little less quiet now — and around the turn.

When I came to the third door down, on the righthand side — the door that had 1006 on it — I stopped and listened a minute to see if I could tell whether she was up yet or not. If she wasn't up yet, I was going back downstairs again, hang around in the lobby, and give her another half hour of badly-needed sleep.

But she was up already. I could hear a sound in there as if she were brushing out her dress or coat with a stiff-bristled brush — *Skish, skish, skish* — so I knocked, easy and loving, on the door with just three knuckles.

The *skish-skish-skish* broke off a minute, but then went right on again. But the door hadn't been tightly closed into the frame at all, and my knocking sent it drifting inward an inch or two. A whiff of turpentine or something like that nearly threw me over, but without stopping to distinguish what it was or wonder what it was coming from there, I pushed the door the rest of the way in and walked in.

Then I pulled up short. I saw I had the wrong room.

There wasn't anything in it — no furniture, that is. Just bare floorboards, walls and ceiling. Even the light fixture had been taken down, and two black wires stuck out of a hole, like insect feelers, where it had been.

A man in spotted white overalls and peaked cap was standing on a step-ladder slapping a paint brush up and down the walls. *Skish-skish-splop!*

I grunted, "Guess I've got the wrong number," and backed out.

"Guess you must have, bud," he agreed, equally laconic, without even turning his head to see who I was.

I looked up at the door from the outside. Number 1006. But that was the number they'd given her, sure it was. I looked in a second time. Long and narrow, like an alcove. Not more than a foot of wall space on either side of the window frame.

Sure, this was the room, all right. They must have found out they had something better available after all, and changed her after I left last night. I said, "Where'd they put the lady that was in here, you got any idea?"

Skish-skish-skish. "I dunno, bud, you'll have to find out at the desk. It was empty when I come here to work at seven." *Skish-skish-splop!*

I went downstairs to the desk again and I said, "Excuse me. What room have you got Mrs. Cannon in now?"

He looked up some chart or other they use, behind the scenes, then he came back and said, "We have no Mrs. Cannon here."

II

I pulled my face back. Then I thrust it forward again. "What's the matter with you?" I said curtly. "I came here with her myself last night. Better take another look."

He did. A longer one. Then he came back and said, "I'm sorry, there's no Mrs. Cannon registered here."

I knew there was nothing to get excited about; it would probably be straightened out in a minute or two; but it was a pain in the neck. I was very patient. After all, this was the first morning of my honeymoon. "Your night man was on duty at the time. It was about three-thirty this morning. He gave her 1006."

He looked that up too. "That's not in use," he said. "That's down for redecorating. It's been empty for the past —"

"I don't care what it is. I tell you they checked my wife in there at three this morning. I went up with her myself! Will you quit arguing and find out what room she's in, for me? I don't want to stand here talking to you all day; I want to be with her."

"But I'm telling you, mister, the occupancy chart shows no one by that name."

"Then look in the register if you don't believe me. I watched her sign it myself."

People were standing around the lobby looking at me now, but I didn't care.

"It would be on the chart," he insisted. "It would have been transferred —" He ran the pad of his finger up the register page from bottom to top. Too fast, I couldn't help noticing; without a hitch, as if there were nothing to impede it. Then he went back a page and ran it up that, in the same streamlined way.

"Give it to me," I said impatiently. "I'll find it for you in a minute." I flung it around my way.

A. Krumbake, and wife, stared at me. And then under that just a blank space all the way down to the bottom of the page. No more check-ins.

I could feel the pores of my face sort of closing up. That was what it felt like, anyway. Maybe it was just the process of getting pale. "She signed right under that name. It's been rubbed out."

"Oh no, it hasn't," he told me firmly. "No one tampers with the register like that. People may leave, but their names stay on it."

Dazedly, I traced the ball of my finger back and forth across the white paper under that name *Krumbake*. Smooth and unimpaired by

erasure. I held the page up toward the light and tried to squint through it, to see whether it showed thinner there, either from rubbing or some other means of eradication. It was all of the same even opacity.

I spoke in a lower voice now; I wasn't being impatient any more. "There's something wrong. Something wrong about this. I can't understand it, I saw her write it. I saw her sign it with my own eyes. I've known it was the right hotel all along, but even if I wasn't sure, this other name, this name above, would prove it to me. Krumbake. I remember it from last night. Maybe they changed her without notifying you down here."

"That wouldn't be possible; it's through me, down here, that all changes are made. It isn't that I don't know what room she's in; it's that there's absolutely no record of any such person ever having been at the hotel, so you see you must be mis—"

"Call the manager for me," I said hoarsely.

I stood there waiting by the onyx-topped desk until he came. I stood there very straight, very impassive, not touching the edge of the counter with my hands in any way, about an inch clear of it.

People were bustling back and forth, casually, normally, cheerily, behind me; plunking their keys down on the onyx; saying, "Any mail for me?" saying, "I'll be in the coffee shop if I'm called." And something was already trying to make me feel a little cut off from them, a little set apart. As if a shadowy finger had drawn a ring around me where I stood, and vapors were already beginning to rise from it, walling me off from my fellow men.

I wouldn't let the feeling take hold of me — yet — but it was already there, trying to. I'd give an imperceptible shake of my head every once in a while and say to myself, "Things like this don't happen, in broad daylight. It's just some kind of misunderstanding; it'll be cleared up presently."

The entrance, the lobby, had seemed so bright when I first came in, but I'd been mistaken. There were shadows lengthening in the far corners that only I could see. The gardenia I had for her was wilting.

The manager was no help at all. He tried to be, listened attentively, but then the most he could do was have the clerk repeat what he'd already done for me, look on the chart and look in the register. After all, details like that were in the hands of the staff. I simply got the same thing as before, only relayed through him now instead of direct from the desk man. "No, there hasn't been any Mrs. Cannon here at any time."

"Your night man will tell you," I finally said in despair. "He'll tell you I brought her here. Get hold of him, ask him. He'll remember us."

"I'll call him down; he rooms

right here in the house," he said. But then with his hand on the phone he stopped to ask again, "Are you quite sure it was this hotel, Mr. Cannon? He was on duty until six this morning, and I hate to wake him up unless you —"

"Bring him down," I said. "This is more important to me than his sleep. It's got to be cleared up." I wasn't frightened yet, out-and-out scared; just baffled, highly worried, and with a peculiar lost feeling.

He came down inside of five minutes. I knew him right away, the minute he stepped out of the car, in spite of the fact that other passengers had come down with him. I was so sure he'd be able to straighten it out that I took a step toward him without waiting for him to join us. If they noticed that, which was a point in favor of my credibility — my knowing him at sight like that — they gave no sign.

I said, "You remember me, don't you? You remember checking my wife into 1006 at three this morning, and telling me I'd have to go elsewhere."

"No," he said with polite regret. "I'm afraid I don't recall having seen you before."

I could feel my face go white as if a soundless bombshell of flour or talcum had just burst all over it. I put one foot behind me and set the heel down and stayed that way.

The manager asked him, "Well, did the gentleman stop at the desk perhaps, just to inquire, and then go elsewhere? Do you remember him at all, Stevens?"

"No, I never saw him before until now. It must have been some other hotel."

"But look at me; look at my face," I tried to say. But I guess I didn't put any voice into it, it was just lip-motion, because he didn't seem to hear.

The manager shrugged amiably, as if to say, "Well, that's all there is to it, as far as we're concerned."

I was breathing hard, fighting for self-control. "No. No, you can't close this matter. I dem — I ask you to give me one more chance to prove to you that I — that I — Call the night porter, the night bellboy that carried up her bag for her."

They were giving one another looks by now, as if I were some sort of crank.

"Listen, I'm in the full possession of my faculties. I'm not drunk, I wouldn't come in here like this if I weren't positive —"

The manager was going to try to pacify me and ease me out. "But don't you see you must be mistaken, old man? There's absolutely no record of it. We're very strict about those things. If any of my men checked a guest in without entering it on the chart of available rooms, and in the register, I'd fire him on the spot. Was it the Palace? Was it the Commander, maybe? Try to think now, you'll get it."

And with each soothing syllable, he led me a step nearer the entrance.

I looked up suddenly, saw that the desk had already receded a considerable distance behind us, and balked. "No, don't do this. This is no way to— Will you get that night-to-morning bellhop? Will you do that one more thing for me?"

He sighed, as if I were trying his patience sorely. "He's probably home sleeping. Just a minute; I'll find out."

It turned out he wasn't. They were so overcrowded and undermanned at the moment that instead of being at home he was sleeping right down in the basement, to save time coming and going. He came up in a couple of minutes, still buttoning the collar of his uniform. I knew him right away. He didn't look straight at me at first, but at the manager.

"Do you remember seeing this gentleman come here with a lady, at three this morning? Do you remember carrying her bag up to 1006 for her?"

Then he did look straight at me — and didn't seem to know me. "No sir, Mr. DeGrasse."

The shock wasn't as great as the first time; it couldn't have been, twice in succession.

"Don't you remember that quilt you got for her, to spread over the mattress, and I gave you a second quarter for bringing it? You must remember that — dark blue, with little white flowers all over it —"

"No sir, boss."

"But I know your face! I remember that scar just over your eyebrow. And — part your lips a little — that gold cap in front that shows every time you grin."

"No, sir, gen'm'n."

My voice was curling up and dying inside my throat. "Then when you took me down alone with you, the last time, you even said, 'I guess she'll be comfortable' —" I squeezed his upper arm pleadingly. "Don't you remember? Don't you remember?"

"No, sir." This time he said it so low you could hardly hear it, as if this training wouldn't let him contradict me too emphatically, but on the other hand he felt obliged to stick to the facts.

I grabbed at the hem of my coat, bunched it up to emphasize the pattern and the color of the material. "Don't you know me by this?" Then I let my fingers trail helplessly down the line of my jaw. "Don't you know my face?"

He didn't answer any more, just shook his head each time.

"What're you doing this for? What're you trying to do to me? All of you?" The invisible fumes from that necromancer's ring, that seemed to cut me off from all the world, came swirling up thicker and thicker about me. My voice was strident with a strange new kind of fear, a fear I hadn't known since I was a kid.

"You've got me rocky now! Cut it out, I say!"

They were starting to draw back little by little away from me, prudently widening a tight knot they had formed around me. I turned from one to the other, from bellhop to night clerk, night clerk to day clerk, day clerk to manager and each one as I turned to him retreated slightly.

There was a pause, while I fought against this other, lesser kind of death that was creeping over me — this death called *strangeness*, this snapping of all the customary little threads of cause and effect that are our moorings at other times. Slowly they all drew back from me, step by step, until I was left there alone, cut off.

Then the tension exploded. My voice blasted the quiet of the lobby. "I want my wife!" I yelled shatteringly. "Tell me what's become of her. What've you done with her? I came in here with her last night; you can't tell me I didn't. . . ."

They circled, maneuvered around me. I heard the manager say in a harried undertone. "I knew this was going to happen. I could have told you he was going to end up like this. George! Archer! Get him out of here, fast!"

My arms were suddenly seized from behind and held. I threshed against the constriction, so violently both my legs flung up clear of the floor at one time, dropped back again, but I couldn't break it. There must have been two of them behind me.

The manager had come in close again, now that I was safely pinioned, no doubt hoping that his nearness would succeed in soft-pedalling the disturbance. "Now will you leave here quietly, or do you want us to call the police and turn you over to them?"

"You'd better call them anyway, Mr. DeGrasse," the day clerk put in. "I've run into this mental type before. He'll only come back in again the minute your back's turned."

"No. I'd rather not, unless he forces me to. It's bad for the hotel. Look at the crowd collecting down here on the main floor already. Tchk, tchk!"

He tried to reason with me. "Now listen, give me a break, will you? You don't look like the kind of a man who — Won't you please go quietly? If I have you turned loose outside, will you go away and promise not to come in here again?"

"*Ali-i-i-i-ice!*" I sent it baying harrowingly down the long vista of lobby, lounges, foyers. I'd been gathering it in me the last few seconds while he was speaking to me. I put my heart and soul into it. It should have shaken down the big old-fashioned chandeliers by its vibration alone. My voice broke under the strain. A woman onlooker somewhere in the background bleated at the very intensity of it.

The manager hit himself between the eyes in consternation. "Oh, my God! Hurry up, call an officer quick, get him out of here."

"See, what did I tell you?" the clerk said knowingly.

I got another chestful of air in, tore loose with it. "Somebody help me! You people standing around looking, isn't there one of you will help me? I brought my wife here last night; now she's gone and they're trying to tell me I never —"

A brown hand suddenly sealed my mouth, was as quickly withdrawn again at the manager's panic-stricken admonition. "George! Archer! Don't lay a hand on him. No rough stuff. Make us liable for damages afterwards, y'know."

Then I heard him and the desk man both give a deep breath of relief. "At last!" And I knew a cop must have come in behind me.

III

The grip on my arms behind my back changed, became single instead of double, one arm instead of two. But I didn't fight against it.

Suddenly I was very passive, unresistant. Because suddenly I had a dread of arrest, confinement. I wanted to preserve my freedom of movement more than all else, to try to find her again. If they threw me in a cell, or put me in a straightjacket, how could I look for her, how could I ever hope to get at the bottom of this mystery?

The police would never believe me. If the very people who had seen her denied her existence, how could I expect those who hadn't to believe in it?

Docile, I let him lead me out to the sidewalk in front of the hotel. The manager came out after us, mopping his forehead, and the desk clerk and a few of the bolder among the guests who had been watching.

They held a three-cornered consultation in which I took no part. I even let the manager's version of what the trouble was about pass unchallenged. Not that he distorted what had actually happened just now, but he made it seem as if I were mistaken about having brought her there last night.

Finally the harness cop asked, "Well, do you want to press charges against him for creating a disturbance in your lobby?"

The manager held his hand palms out, horrified. "I should say not. We're having our biggest rush of the year right now. I can't take time off to run down there and go through all that tommyrot. Just see that he doesn't come in again and create any more scenes."

"I'll see to that all right," the cop promised truculently.

They went inside again, the manager and the clerk and the gallery that had watched us from the front steps. Inside, to the hotel that had swallowed her alive.

The cop read me a lecture, to which I listened in stony silence. Then he gave me a shove that sent me floundering, and said, "Keep moving now, hear me?"

I pointed and said, "That's my car standing there. May I get in it?"

He checked first to make sure it was, then he opened the door, said, "Yeah, get in it and get out of here."

He'd made no slightest attempt to find out what was behind the whole thing, whether there was some truth to my story or not, or whether it was drink, drugs or mental aberration. But then, he was only a harness cop. That's why I hadn't wanted to tangle with him.

This strangeness that had risen up around me was nothing to be fought by an ordinary patrolman. I was going to them — the police — but I was going of my own free will and in my own way, not being dragged in by the scruff of the neck and then put under observation for the next twenty-four hours.

Ten minutes or so later I got in front of the first precinct house I came upon, and went in, and said to the desk sergeant. "I want to talk to the lieutenant in charge."

He stared at me coldly.

"What about?"

"About my wife."

I didn't talk to him alone. Three of his men were present. They were just shapes in the background as far as I was concerned, sitting there very quietly, listening.

I told it simply, hoping against hope I could get them to believe me, feeling somehow I couldn't even before I had started.

"I'm Jimmy Cannon. I'm twenty-five years old, and I'm from Lake City. Last evening after dark my girl and I — her name was Alice Brown — we left there in my car, and at 1.15 this morning we were married by a justice of the peace.

"I think his name was Hulskamp — anyway it's a white house with morning glories all over the porch, about fifty miles this side of Lake City.

"We got in here at three, and they gave her a little room at the Royal Hotel. They couldn't put me up, but they put her up alone. The number was 1006. I know that as well as I know I'm sitting here. This morning when I went over there, they were painting the room and I haven't been able to find a trace of her since.

"I saw her sign the register, but her name isn't on it any more. The night clerk says he never saw her. The bellboy says he never saw her. Now they've got me so I'm scared and shaky, like a little kid is of the dark. I want you men to help me. Won't you men help me?"

"We'll help you" — said the lieutenant in charge. Slowly, awfully slowly; I didn't like that slowness. — "if we're able to." And I knew what he meant; if we find any evidence that your story is true.

He turned his head toward one of the three shadowy listeners in the background, at random. The one nearest him. Then he changed his mind, shifted his gaze further along to the one in the middle. "Ainslie, suppose you take a whack at this. Go over to this hotel and see what you can find. Take him with you."

So, as he stood up, I separated him from the blurred background for the first time. I was disappointed. He was just another man like me, maybe five years older, maybe an inch or two shorter. He could feel cold and hungry, and tired, just as I could. He could believe a lie, just as I could. He couldn't see around corners or through walls, or into hearts, any more than I could. What good was he going to be?

He looked as if he'd seen every rotten thing there was in the world. He looked as if he'd once expected to see other things beside that, but didn't any more. He said. "Yes, sir," and you couldn't tell whether he was bored or interested, or liked the detail or resented it, or gave a rap.

On the way over I said, "You've got to find out what became of her. You've got to make them —"

"I'll do what I can." He couldn't seem to get any emotion into his voice. After all, from his point of view, why should he care?

"You'll do what you can!" I gasped. "Didn't you ever have a wife?"

He gave me a look, but you couldn't tell what was in it.

We went straight back to the Royal. He was very business-like, did a streamlined, competent job. Didn't waste a question or a motion, but didn't leave out a single relevant thing either.

I took back what I'd been worried about at first; he was good.

But he wasn't good enough for this, whatever it was.

It went like this: "Let me see your register." He took out a glass, went over the place I pointed out to him where she had signed. Evidently couldn't find any marks of erasure any more than I had with my naked eye.

Then he went up to the room, 1006. The painter was working on the wood trim by now, had all four walls and the ceiling done. It was such a small cubbyhole it wasn't even a half-day's work. He said, "Where was the furniture when you came in here to work this morning? Still in the room, or had the room been cleared?"

"Still in the room; I cleared it myself. There wasn't much; a chair, a scatter-rug, a cot."

"Was the cot made or unmade?"

"Made up."

"Was the window opened or closed when you came in?"

"Closed tight."

"Was the air in the room noticeably stale, as if it had been closed up that way all night, or not noticeably so, as if it had only been closed up shortly before?"

"Turrible, like it hadn't been aired for a week. And believe me, when I notice a place is stuffy, you can bet it's stuffy all right."

"Were there any marks on the walls or floor or anywhere around the room that didn't belong there?"

I knew he meant blood, and gnawed the lining of my cheek.

"Nothing except plain dirt, that needed painting over bad."

We visited the housekeeper next. She took us to the linen room and showed us. "If there're any dark blue quilts in use in this house, it's the first I know about it. The bellboy *could* have come in here at that hour — but all he would have gotten are maroon ones. And here's my supply list, every quilt accounted for. So it didn't come from here."

We visited the baggage room next. "Look around and see if there's anything in here that resembles that bag of your wife's." I did, and there wasn't. Wherever she had gone, whatever had become of her, her bag had gone with her.

About fifty minutes after we'd first gone in, we were back in my car outside the hotel again. He'd done a good, thorough job; and if *I* was willing to admit that, it must have been.

We sat there without moving a couple of minutes, me under the wheel. He kept looking at me steadily, sizing me up. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. I threw my head back and started to look up the face of the building, story by story. I counted as my eyes rose, and when they'd come to the tenth floor, I stopped them there, swung them around the corner of the building to the third window from the end, stopped them there for good. It was a skinnier window than the others. So small, so high up, to hold so much mystery. "Alice," I whispered up to it, and it didn't answer, didn't hear.

His voice brought my gaze down from there again. "The burden of the proof is on you now. It's up to you to give me some evidence that she actually went in there. That she actually was with you. That she actually *was*. I wasn't able to find a single person in that building who actually saw her."

I just looked at him, the kind of a look you get from someone right after you stick a knife in his heart. Finally I said with quiet bitterness, "So now I have to prove I had a wife."

The instant, remorseless way he answered that was brutal in itself. "Yes, you do. Can you?"

I pushed my hat off, raked my fingers through my hair, with one and the same gesture. "Could you, if someone asked you in the middle of the street? Could you?"

He peeled out a wallet, flipped it open. A tiny snapshot of a woman's head and shoulders danced in front of my eyes for a split second. He folded it and put it away again. He briefly touched a gold band on his finger, token of that old custom that is starting to revive again, of husbands wearing marriage rings as well as wives.

"And a dozen other ways. You could call Tremont 4102. Or you could call the marriage clerk at the City Hall —"

"But we were just beginning,"

I said bleakly. "I have no pictures. She was wearing the only ring we had. The certificate was to be mailed to us at Lake City in a few days. You could call this justice of the peace, Hulskamp, out near U. S. 9; he'll tell you —"

"Okay, Cannon. I'll do that. We'll go back to headquarters. I'll tell the lieutenant what I've gotten so far, and I'll do it from there."

Now at last it would be over, now at last it would be straightened out. He left me sitting in the room outside the lieutenant's office, while he was in there reporting to him. He seemed to take a long time, so I knew he must be doing more than just reporting; they must be talking it over.

Finally Ainslie looked out at me, but only to say, "What was the name of that justice you say married you, again?"

"Hulskamp."

He closed the door again. I had another long wait. Finally it opened a second time, he hitched his head at me to come in. The atmosphere when I got in there, was one of hard, brittle curiosity, without any feeling to it. As when you look at somebody afflicted in a way you never heard of before, and wonder how he got that way.

I got that distinctly, even from Ainslie, and it was fairly oozing from his lieutenant and the other men in the room. They looked and looked and looked at me.

The lieutenant did the talking. "You say a Justice Hulskamp married you. You still say that?"

"A white house sitting off the road, this side of Lake City, just before you get to U. S. 9 —"

"Well there is a Justice Hulskamp, and he does live out there. We just had him on the phone. He says he never married anyone named James Cannon to anyone named Alice Brown, last night or any other night. He hasn't married anyone who looks like you, recently, to anyone who looks as you say she did. He didn't marry anyone at all at any time last night —"

He was going off some place while he talked to me, and his voice was going away after him. Ainslie filled a paper cup with water at the cooler in the corner, strewed it deftly across my face, once each way, as if I were some kind of a potted plant, and one of the other guys picked me up from the floor and put me back on the chair again.

The lieutenant's voice came back again stronger, as if he hadn't gone away after all. "Who were her people in Lake City?"

"She had none; she was an orphan."

"Well, where did she work there?"

"At the house of a family named Beresford, at 20 New Hampshire Avenue. She was in service there, a maid; she lived with them —"

"Give me long distance. Give me Lake City. This is Midcity Police. I want to talk to a party, Beresford, 20 New Hampshire Avenue."

The ring came back fast. "We're holding a man here who claims he married a maid working for you. A girl by the name of Alice Brown."

He'd hung up before I even knew it was over. "There's no maid employed there. They don't know anything about any Alice Brown, never heard of her."

IV

I stayed on the chair this time. I just didn't hear so clearly for a while, everything was sort of fuzzy.

". . . Hallucinations . . . And he's in a semi-hysterical condition right now. Notice how jerky his reflexes are?" Someone was chopping the edge of his hand at my kneecap. "Seems harmless. Let him go. It'll probably wear off. I'll give him a sedative." Someone snapped a bag shut, left the room.

The lieutenant's voice was as flat as it was deadly, and it brooked no argument. "You never had a wife, Cannon?"

I could see only Ainslie's face in the welter before me. "You have, though, haven't you?" I said, so low none of the others could catch it.

The lieutenant was still talking to me. "Now get out of here, before we change our minds and call an ambulance to take you away. And don't go back into any more hotels raising a row."

I hung around outside; I wouldn't go away. Where was there to go? One of the others came out, looked at me fleetingly in passing, said with humorous tolerance, "You better get out of here before the lieutenant catches you," and went on about his business.

I waited until I saw Ainslie come out. Then I went up to him. "I've got to talk to you; you've got to listen to me —"

"Why? The matter's closed. You heard the lieutenant."

He went back to some sort of a locker room. I went after him.

"You're not supposed to come back here. Now look, Cannon, I'm telling you for your own good, you're looking for trouble if you keep this up."

"Don't turn me down," I said hoarsely, tugging away at the seam of his sleeve. "Can't you see the state I'm in? I'm like someone in a dark room, crying for a match. I'm like someone drowning, crying for a helping hand. I can't make it alone any more."

There wasn't anyone in the place but just the two of us. My pawing grip slipped down his sleeve to the hem of his coat, and I was looking up at him from my knees. What did I care? There was no such thing as pride or dignity any more. I would have crawled flat along the floor on my belly, just to get a word of relief out of anyone.

"Forget you're a detective, and I'm a case. I'm appealing to you as one human being to another. I'm appealing to you as one husband to another. Don't turn your back on

me like that, don't pull my hands away from your coat. I don't ask you to do anything for me any more; you don't have to lift a finger. Just say, 'Yes, you had a wife, Cannon.' Just give me that one glimmer of light in the dark. Say it even if you don't mean it, even if you don't believe it, say it anyway. Oh, say it, will you —"

He drew the back of his hand slowly across his mouth, either in disgust at my abasement or in a sudden access of pity. Maybe a little of both. His voice was hoarse, as if he were sore at the spot I was putting him in.

"Give me anything," he said, shaking me a little and jogging me to my feet, "the slightest thing, to show that she ever existed, to show that there ever was such a person outside of your own mind, and I'll be with you to the bitter end. Give me a pin that she used to fasten her dress with. Give me a grain of powder, a stray hair; but prove that it was hers. I can't do it unless you do."

"And I have nothing to show you. Not a pin, not a grain of powder."

I took a few dragging steps toward the locker room door, "You're doing something to me that I wouldn't do to a dog," I mumbled. "What you're doing to me is worse than if you were to kill me. You're locking me up in shadows for the rest of my life. You're taking my mind away from me. You're condemning me slowly but surely to madness, to being without a mind. It won't happen right away, but sooner or later, in six months or in a year — Well, I guess that's that."

I fumbled my way out of the locker room and down the passageway outside, guiding myself with one arm along the wall, and past the sergeant's desk and down the steps, and then I was out in the street.

I left my car there where it was. What did I want with it? I started to walk, without knowing where I was going. I walked a long time, and a good long distance.

Then all of a sudden I noticed a lighted drugstore — it was dark by now — across the way. I must have passed others before now, but this was the first one I noticed.

I crossed over and looked in the open doorway. It had telephone booths; I could see them at the back, to one side. I moved on a few steps, stopped, and felt in my pockets. I found a quill toothpick and I dug the point of it good and hard down the back of my finger, ripped the skin open. Then I threw it away. I wrapped a handkerchief around the finger and I turned around and went inside.

I said to the clerk, "Give me some iodine. My cat just scratched me and I don't want to take any chances."

He said, "Want me to put it on for you?"

I said, "No, gimme the whole bottle. I'll take it home; we're out of it as it happens."

I paid him for it and moved over to one side and started to thumb through one of the directories in the rack. Just as he went back inside the prescription room, I found my number. I went into the end booth and pulled the slide closed. I took off my hat and hung it over the phone mouthpiece, sort of making myself at home.

Then I sat down and started to undo the paper he'd just wrapped around the bottle. When I had it off, I pulled the knot of my tie out a little further to give myself lots of room. Then I took the stopper out of the bottle and tilted my head back and braced myself.

Something that felt like a baseball bat came chopping down on the arm I was bringing up, and nearly broke it in two, and the iodine sprayed all over the side of the booth. Ainslie was standing there in the half-opened slide.

He said, "Come on outta there!" and gave me a pull by the collar of my coat that did it for me. He didn't say anything more until we were out on the sidewalk in front of the place. Then he stopped and looked me over from head to foot as if I was some kind of a microbe. He said, "Well, it was worth coming all this way after you, at that!"

My car was standing there; I'd left the keys in it and he must have tailed me in that. He pointed to it, and I went over and climbed in limply. He stayed outside, with one foot on the running board.

I said, "I can't live with shadows, Ainslie. I'm frightened, too frightened to go on. You don't know what the nights'll be like from now on. And the days won't be much better. I'd rather go now, fast. Show her to me on a slab at the morgue and I won't whimper. Show her to me all cut up in small pieces and I won't bat an eyelash. But don't say she never was."

"I guessed what was coming from the minute I saw you jab yourself with that toothpick." He watched sardonically while I slowly unwound the handkerchief that had stayed around my finger all this time. The scratch had hardly bled at all. Just a single hairline of red was on the handkerchief.

We both looked at that.

Then more of the handkerchief came open. We both looked at that.

Then more of the handkerchief came open. We both looked at the initials in the corner. *A.B.* We both, most likely, smelled the faint sweetness that still came from it at the same time. Very faint, for it was such a small handkerchief.

We both looked at each other, and both our minds made the same discovery at the same time. I was the one who spoke it aloud. "It's hers," I said grimly; "the wife that didn't exist."

"This is a fine time to come out with it," he said quietly. "Move over, I'll drive." That was his way of saying, "I'm in."

I said, "I remember now. I got a

cinder in my eye, during the drive in, and she lent me her handkerchief to take it out with; I didn't have one of my own on me. I guess I forgot to give it back to her. And this — is it." I looked at him rebukingly. "What a difference a few square inches of linen can make. Without it, I was a madman. With it, I'm a rational being who enlists your cooperation. I could have picked it up in any five-and-ten."

"No. You didn't turn it up when it would have done you the most good, back at the station house. You only turned it up several minutes after you were already supposed to have gulped a bottle of iodine. I could tell by your face you'd forgotten about it until then yourself. I think that does make a difference. To me, anyway." He meshed gears.

"And what're you going to do about it?"

"Since we don't believe in the supernatural, our only possible premise is that there's been some human agency at work."

I noticed the direction he was taking. "Aren't you going back to the Royal?"

"There's no use bothering with the hotel. D'you see what I mean?"

"No, I don't," I said bluntly. "That was where she disappeared."

"The focus for this wholesale case of astigmatism is elsewhere, outside the hotel. It's true we could try to break them down, there at the hotel. But what about the justice, what about the Beresford house in Lake City? I think it'll be simpler to try to find out the reason than the mechanics of the disappearance.

"And the reason lies elsewhere. Because you brought her to the hotel from the justice's. And to the justice's from Lake City. The hotel was the last stage. Find out why the justice denies he married you, and we don't have to find out why the hotel staff denies having seen her. Find out why the Beresford house denies she was a maid there and we don't have to find out why the justice denies he married you.

"Find out, maybe, something else, and we don't have to find out why the Beresford house denies she was a maid there. The time element keeps moving backward through the whole thing. Now talk to me. How long did you know her? How well? How much did you know about her?"

"Not long. Not well. Practically nothing. And yet all I wanted, all I needed to. It was one of those storybook things. I met her a week ago last night. She was sitting on a bench in the park, as if she were lonely, didn't have a friend in the world. I don't make a habit of accosting girls on park benches, but she looked so dejected it got to me.

"Well, that's how we met. I walked her home afterwards to where she said she lived. But when we got there — it was a mansion! I got nervous, said, 'Gee, this is a pretty swell place for a clerk like me to be bringing anyone home to.'

"She laughed and said, 'I'm only the maid. Disappointed?' I said, 'No, I would have been disappointed if you'd been anybody else, because then you wouldn't've been in my class.' She seemed relieved after I said that. She said, 'Gee, I've waited so long to find someone who'd like me for myself.'

"Well, to make a long story short, we made an appointment to meet at that same bench the next night. I waited there for two hours and she never showed up. Luckily I went back there the next night again — and there she was. She explained she hadn't been able to get out the night before; the people where she worked were having company or something.

"When I took her home that night I asked her name, which I didn't know yet, and that seemed to scare her. She got sort of flustered, and I saw her look at her handbag. It had the initials A.B. on it; I'd already noticed that the first night I met her. She said, 'Alice Brown.'

"By the third time we met we were already nuts about each other. I asked her whether she'd take a chance and marry me. She said, 'Is it possible someone wants to marry little Alice Brown who hasn't a friend in the world?' I said yes, and that was all there was to it.

"Only, when I left her that night, she seemed kind of scared. First I thought she was scared I'd change my mind, back out, but it wasn't that. She said, 'Jimmy, let's hurry up and don't let's put it off. Let's do it while — while we have the chance'; and she hung onto my sleeve tight with both hands.

"So the next day I asked for a week off, which I had coming to me from last summer anyway, and I waited for her with the car on the corner three blocks away from the house where she was in service. She came running as if the devil were behind her, but I thought that was because she didn't want to keep me waiting. She just had one little overnight bag with her.

"She jumped in, and her face looked kind of white, and she said, 'Hurry, Jimmy, hurry!' And away we went. And until we were outside of Lake City, she kept looking back every once in a while, as if she were afraid someone was coming after us."

Ainslie didn't say much after all that rigamarole I'd given him. Just five words, after we'd driven on for about ten minutes or so. "She was afraid of something." And then in another ten minutes. "And whatever it was, it's what's caught up with her now."

We stopped at the filling station where Alice and I had stopped for gas the night before. I looked over the attendants, said: "There's the one serviced us." Ainslie called him over, played a pocket light on my face.

"Do you remember servicing this man last night? This man, and a girl with him?"

"Nope, not me. Maybe some —."

Neither of us could see his hands at the moment; they were out of range below the car door. I said, "He's got a white scar across the back of his right hand. I saw it last night when he was wiping the windshield."

Ainslie said, "Hold it up."

He did, and there was a white cicatrice across it, where stitches had been taken or something. Ainslie said, "Now whaddye say?"

It didn't shake him in the least. "I still say no. Maybe he saw me at one time or another, but I've never seen him, to my knowledge, with or without a girl." He waited a minute, then added: "Why should I deny it, if it was so?"

"We'll be back, in a day or in a week or in a month," Ainslie let him know grimly, "but we'll be back — to find that out."

We drove on. "Those four square inches of linen handkerchief will be wearing pretty thin, if this keeps up," I muttered dejectedly after a while.

"Don't let that worry you," he said, looking straight ahead. "Once I'm sold, I don't unsell easy."

We crossed U. S. 9 a half-hour later. A little white house came skimming along out of the darkness. "This is where I was married to a ghost," I said.

He braked, twisted the grip of the door latch. My hand shot down, stopped his arm.

"Wait, before you go in, listen to this. It may help out that handkerchief. There'll be a round mirror in the hall, to the left of the door, with antlers over it for a hatrack. In their parlor, where he read the service, there'll be an upright piano, with brass candle holders sticking out of the front of it, above the keyboard. It's got a scarf on it that ends in a lot of little plush balls. And on the music rack, the top selection is a copy of *Kiss Me Again.* And on the wall there's a painting of a lot of fruit rolling out of a basket. And this housekeeper, he calls her Dora."

"That's enough," he said in that toneless voice of his. "I told you I was with you anyway, didn't I?" He got out and went over and rang the bell. I went with him, of course.

They must have been asleep; they didn't answer right away. Then the housekeeper opened the door and looked out at us. Before we could say anything, we heard the justice call down the stairs, "Who is it, Dora?"

Ainslie asked if we could come in and talk to him and straightened his necktie in the round mirror to the left of the door, with antlers over it.

Hulskamp came down in a bathrobe, and Ainslie said, "You married this man to a girl named Alice Brown last night." It wasn't a question.

The justice said, "No. I've already been asked that once, over the phone, and I said I hadn't. I've never seen this young man before." He even put on his glasses to look at me better.

Ainslie didn't argue the matter, almost seemed to take him at his word. "I won't ask you to let me see your records," he said dryly, "because they'll undoubtedly — bear out your word."

He strolled as far as the parlor entrance, glanced in idly. I peered over his shoulder. There was an upright piano with brass candle sconces. A copy of *Kiss Me Again* was topmost on its rack. A painting of fruit rolling out of a basket daubed the wall.

"They certainly will!" snapped the justice resentfully.

The housekeeper put her oar in. "I'm a witness at all the marriages the justice performs, and I'm sure the young man's mistaken. I don't ever recall —"

V

Ainslie steadied me with one hand clasping my arm, and led me out without another word. We got in the car again. Their door closed, somewhat forcefully.

I pounded the rim of the wheel helplessly with my fist. I said, "What is it? Some sort of wholesale conspiracy? But *why?* She's not important; I'm not important."

He threw in the clutch, the little white house ebbed away in the night-darkness behind us.

"It's some sort of a conspiracy, all right," he said. "We've got to get the reason for it. That's the quickest, shortest way to clear it up. To take any of the weaker links, the bellboy at the hotel or that filling station attendant, and break them down, would not only take days, but in the end would only get us some anonymous individual who'd either threatened them or paid them to forget having seen your wife, and we wouldn't be much further than before. If we can get the reason behind it all, the source, we don't have to bother with any of these small fry. That's why we're heading back to Lake City instead of just concentrating on that hotel in Midcity."

We made Lake City by one A.M. and I showed him the way to New Hampshire Avenue. Number 20 was a massive corner house, and we glided up to it from the back, along the side street; braked across the way from the service entrance I'd always brought her back to. Not a light was showing anywhere.

"Don't get out yet," he said. "When you brought her home nights, you brought her to this back door, right?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, did you ever actually see her open it and go in, or did you just leave her here by it and walk off without waiting to see where she went?"

I felt myself get a little frightened again. This was something that hadn't occurred to me until now. "I didn't once actually see the door open and her go inside, now that I come to think of it. She seemed to — to want me to walk off without

waiting. She didn't say so, but I could tell. I thought maybe it was because she didn't want her employers to catch on she was going around with anyone. I'd walk off, down that way —"

I pointed to the corner behind us, on the next avenue over. "Then when I got there, I'd look back from there each time. As anyone would. Each time I did, she wasn't there any more. I thought she'd gone in, but — it's funny, I never saw her go in."

He nodded gloomily. "Just about what I thought. For all you know, she didn't even belong in that house, never went in there at all. A quick little dash, while your back was turned, would have taken her around the corner of the house and out of sight. And the city would have swallowed her up."

"But why?" I said helplessly.

He didn't answer that. We hadn't had a good look at the front of the house yet. As I have said, we had approached from the rear, along the side street. He got out of the car now, and I followed suit. We walked down the few remaining yards to the corner and turned and looked all up and down the front of it.

It was an expensive limestone building; it spelt real dough, even looking at it in the dark as we were. There was a light showing from the front, through one of the tall ground-floor windows — but a very dim one, almost like a night light. It didn't send any shine outside; just peered wanly around the sides of the blind that had been drawn on the inside.

Something moved close up against the door-facing, stirred a little. If it hadn't been white limestone, it wouldn't have even been noticeable at all. We both saw it at once; I caught instinctively at Ainslie's arm, and a cold knife of dull fear went through me — though why I couldn't tell.

"Crepe on the front door," he whispered. "Somebody's dead in there. Whether she did go in here or didn't, just the same I think we'd better have a look at the inside of this place."

I took a step in the direction of the front door. He recalled me with a curt gesture. "And by that I don't mean march up the front steps, ring the doorbell and flash my badge in their eyes."

"Then how?"

Brakes ground somewhere along the side street behind us. We turned our heads and a lacquered sedan-truck had drawn up directly before the service door of 20 New Hampshire Avenue. "Just in time," Ainslie said. "This is how."

We started back toward it. The driver and a helper had gotten down, were unloading batches of camp chairs and stacking them up against the side of the truck, preparatory to taking them in.

"For the services tomorrow, I suppose," Ainslie grunted. He said to the driver, "Who is it that died?"

"Mean to say you ain't heard? It's in alla papers."

"We're from out of town."

"Alma Beresford, the heiress. Richest gal in twenty-four states. She was an orphan, too. Pretty soft for her guardian; not another soul to get the cash but him."

"What was it?" For the first time since I'd known him, you couldn't have called Ainslie's voice toneless; it was sort of springy like a rubber band that's pulled too tight.

"Heart attack, I think." The truckman snapped his fingers. "Like that. Shows you. Rich or poor, when you gotta go, you gotta go."

Ainslie asked only one more question. "Why you bringing these setups at an hour like this? They're not going to hold the services in the middle of the night, are they?"

"Nah, first thing in the morning; so early there wouldn't be a chance to get 'em over here unless we delivered 'em ahead of time." He was suddenly staring fascinatedly down at the silvery lining of Ainslie's hand.

Ainslie's voice was toneless again. "Tell you what you fellows are going to do. You're going to save yourselves the trouble of hauling all those camp chairs inside, and you're going to get paid for it in the bargain. Lend us those work aprons y'got on."

He slipped them something apiece; I couldn't see whether it was two dollars or five. "Gimme your delivery ticket; I'll get it receipted for you. You two get back in the truck and lie low."

We both doffed our hats and coats, put them in our own car, rolled our shirtsleeves, put on the work aprons, and rang the service bell. There was a short wait and then a wire-sheathed bulb over the entry glimmered pallidly as an indication someone was coming. The door opened and a gaunt-faced, sandy-haired man looked out at us. It was hard to tell just how old he was. He looked like a butler, but he was dressed in a business suit, so he must have occupied some other position in the household.

"Camp chairs from the Thebes Funerary Chapel," Ainslie said, reading from the delivery ticket.

"Follow me and I'll show you where they're to go," he said in a hushed voice. "Be as quiet as you can. We've only just succeeded in getting Mr. Hastings to lie down and try to rest a little." The guardian, I supposed. In which case this anemic-looking customer would be the guardian's Man Friday.

We each grabbed up a double armful of the camp chairs and went in after him. They were corded together in batches of half a dozen. We could have cleared up the whole consignment at once — they were lightweight — but Ainslie gave me the eye not to; I guess he wanted to have an excuse to prolong our presence as much as possible.

You went down a short delivery passageway, then up a few steps

into a brightly lighted kitchen. We hadn't been able to see it from the street.

A hatchet-faced woman in maid's livery was sitting by a table crying away under one eye-shading hand, a teacup and a tumbler of gin before her. Judging by the redness of her nose, she'd been at it for hours. "My baby," she'd mew every once in a while.

We followed him out at the other side, through a pantry, a gloomy-looking dining room, and finally into a huge cavernous front room, eerily suffused with flickering candlelight that did no more than heighten the shadows in its far corners. It was this wavering pallor that we must have seen from outside, around the front of the house.

An open coffin rested on a flower-massed bier at the upper end of the place, a lighted taper glimmering at each corner of it. A violet velvet pall had been spread over the top of it, concealing what lay within

But a tiny peaked outline, that could have been made by an uptilted nose, was visible in the plush at one extremity of its length. That knife of dread gave an excruciating little twist in me, and again I didn't know why — or refused to admit I did. It was as if I instinctively sensed the nearness of something — or someone — familiar.

The rest of the room, before this monument to mortality, had been left clear, its original furniture moved aside or taken out. The man who had admitted us gave us our instructions in a sepulchral voice.

"Arrange them in four rows, here in front of the bier. Leave an aisle through them. And be sure and leave enough space up ahead for the divine who will deliver the oration." Then he retreated to the door and stood watching us for a moment, moiling his hands together with a sickening sort of obsequious gesture.

Ainslie produced a knife from the pocket of his borrowed apron, began severing the cording that bound the frames of the camp chairs together. I opened them one at a time as he freed them and began setting them up in quadruple rows, being as slow about it as I could.

There was a slight sound and the factotum had tiptoed back toward the kitchen for a moment, perhaps for a sip of the comforting gin. Ainslie raised his head, caught my eye, speared his thumb at the bier imperatively. I was the nearer of us to it at the moment. I knew what he meant; look and see who it was.

I went cold all over, but I put down the camp chair I was fiddling with and edged over toward it on arched feet. The taper-flames bent down flat as I approached them, and sort of hissed. Sweat needled out under the roots of my hair. I went around by the head, where that tiny little peak was, reached out and gingerly took hold of the corners of the velvet pall, which fell loosely over the two sides of the coffin with-

out quite meeting the headboard.

Just as my wrists flexed to tip it back, Ainslie coughed warningly. There was a whispered returning tread from beyond the doorway. I let go, took a quick side-jump back toward where I'd been. It didn't carry me all the way back by any means, the room was such a big barn of a place, but it carried me sufficiently far away from the bier to look innocuous.

I glanced around and the secretary fellow had come back again, was standing there with his eyes fixed on me. I pretended to be measuring off the distance for the pulpit with my foot.

"You men are rather slow about it," he said, thin lipped.

"You want 'em just so, don't you?" Ainslie answered. He went out to get the second batch. I pretended one of the stools had jammed and I was having trouble getting it open, as an excuse to linger behind. The secretary was on his guard. He lingered too.

The dick took care of that. He waited until he was halfway back with his load of camp chairs, then dropped them all over the pantry floor with a clatter, to draw the watchdog off.

It worked. He gave a huff of annoyance, turned and went in to bawl Ainslie out for the noise he had made. The minute the doorway cleared, I gave a cat-like spring back toward the velvet mound. I made it. I flung the pall back—

Then I let go of it, and the lighted candles started spinning around my head, faster and faster, until they made a comet-like track of fire. The still face staring up at me from the coffin was Alice's. Last night a bride. Tonight a corpse.

VI

I felt my knees hit something, and I was swaying back and forth on them there beside the bier. I could hear somebody coming back toward the room, but whether it was Ainslie or the other guy, I didn't know and didn't care. Then an arm went around me and steadied me to my feet once more, so I knew it was Ainslie.

"It's her," I said brokenly. "Alice. I can't understand it; she must—have—been this rich girl, Alma Beresford, all the time—"

He let go of it, took a quick step over to the coffin, flung the pall even further back than I had. He dipped his head as if he was staring nearsightedly. Then he turned and I never felt my shoulder grabbed so hard before, or since. His fingers felt like steel claws that went in, and met in the middle. For a minute I didn't know whether he was attacking me or not; and I was too dazed to care.

He was pointing at the coffin. "Look at that!" he demanded. I didn't know what he meant. He shook me brutally, either to get me to understand or because of excitement. "*She's not dead. Watch her chest.*"

I fixed my eyes on it. You could tell only by watching the line where the white satin of her burial gown met the violet quilting of the coffin lining. The white was faintly, but unmistakably and rhythmically rising and falling. The tides of life were still there.

"They've got her either drugged or in a coma —"

He broke off short, let go of me as if my shoulder were red hot and burned his fingers. His hand flashed down and up again, and he'd drawn and sighted over my shoulder. "Put it down or I'll let you have it right where you are!" he said.

Something thudded to the carpet. I turned and the secretary was standing there in the doorway, palms out, a fallen revolver lying at his feet.

"Go over and get that, Cannon," Ainslie ordered. "This looks like the finish now. Let's see what we've got here."

There was an arched opening behind him, leading out to the front entrance hall, I suppose, and the stairway to the upper floors. We'd come in from the rear, remember. Velvet drapes had been drawn closed over that arch, sealing it up, the whole time we'd been in there.

He must have come in through there. I bent down before the motionless secretary, and with my fingers an inch away from the fallen gun at his feet, I heard the impact of a head blow and Ainslie gave the peculiar guttural groan of someone going down into unconsciousness.

The secretary's foot snaked out and sped the gun skidding far across to the other side of the room. Then he dropped on my curved back like a dead weight and I went down flat under him, pushing my face into the parquet flooring.

He kept aiming blows at the side of my head from above, but he had only his fists to work with at the moment, and even the ones that landed weren't as effective as whatever it was that had been used on Ainslie. I reached upward and over, caught the secretary by the shoulders of his coat, tugged and at the same time jerked my body out from under him in the opposite direction; and he came flying up in a backward somersault and landed sprawling a few feet away. He was a lightweight anyway.

I got up and looked. Ainslie lay inert, face down on the floor to one side of the coffin, something gleaming wet down the part of his hair. There was a handsome but vicious-looking gray-haired man in a brocaded dressing gown standing behind him holding a gun on me, trying to cow me with it.

"Get him, Mr. Hastings," panted the one I'd just flung off.

It would have taken more than a gun to hold me, after what I'd been through. I charged at him, around Ainslie's form. He evidently didn't want to fire, didn't want the noise of a shot to be heard there in the house. Instead, he reversed his

gun, swung the butt high up over his shoulder; and my own head-first charge undid me. I couldn't swerve or brake in time, plunged right in under it. A hissing, spark-shedding skyrocket seemed to tear through the top of my head, and I went down into nothingness as Ainslie had.

. . . For an hour after I recovered consciousness I was in complete darkness. Such utter darkness that I couldn't be sure the blow hadn't affected my optic nerve, temporarily put my eyesight out of commission.

I was in a sitting position, on something cold — stone flooring probably — with my hands lashed behind me, around something equally cold and sweating moisture, most likely a water pipe. My feet were tied too, and there was a gag over my mouth. My head blazed with pain.

After what seemed like an age, a smoky gray light began to dilute the blackness; so at least my eyesight wasn't impaired. As the light strengthened it showed me, first, a barred grate high up on the wall through which the dawn was peering in. Next, a dingy basement around me, presumably that of the same New Hampshire Avenue house we had entered several hours ago.

And finally, if that was any consolation to me, Ainslie sitting facing me from across the way, in about the same fix I was. Hands and feet secured, sitting before another pipe, mouth also gagged. A dark skein down one side of his forehead, long since dried, marked the effect of the blow he had received. His eyes were open and fixed on me, so he'd probably recovered consciousness some time before I had.

We just stared at each other, unable to communicate. We could turn our heads. He shook his from side to side deprecatingly. I knew what he meant: "Fine spot we ended up in, didn't we?" I nodded, meaning, "You said it."

But we were enjoying perfect comfort and peace of mind, compared to what was to follow. It came within about half an hour at the most. Sounds of activity began to penetrate to where we were. First a desultory moving about sounded over our heads, as if someone were looking things over to make sure everything was in order. Then something heavy was set down; it might have been a table, a desk — or a pulpit.

This cellar compartment we were in seemed to be directly under that large front room where the coffin was and where the obsequies were to be held. I remember how there had been no carpeting on it last night when we were in there. Originally a ballroom, maybe.

A dawning horror began to percolate through me. I looked at Ainslie and tried to make him understand what I was thinking. I didn't need to, he was thinking the same thing. I could tell by the look in his eyes.

She'd been alive when we'd seen

her last night. Early this same morning, rather. What were they going to do — go ahead with it, anyway?

A car door clashed faintly, somewhere off in the distance outside. It must have been at the main entrance of this very house we were in, for within a moment or two new footsteps sounded overhead, picking their way along, as down an aisle under guidance. Then something scraped slightly, like the leg rests of a camp chair straining under the weight of a body.

It repeated itself eight or ten times after that. The impact of a car door outside in the open, then the sedate footsteps over us — some the flat dull ones of men, some the sharp brittle ones of women — then the slight shift and click of the camp chairs. I didn't have to be told its meaning; probably Ainslie didn't either. The mourners were arriving for the services.

It was probably unintentional, our having been placed directly below like this; but it was the most diabolic torture that could ever have been devised. Was she dead yet, or wasn't she? But she had to be before —

They couldn't be that low. Maybe the drug she'd been under last night was timed to take fatal effect between then and now. But suppose it hadn't?

The two of us were writhing there like maimed snakes. Ainslie kept trying to bring his knees up and meet them with his chin, and at first I couldn't understand what his idea was. Then I saw he was trying to snag the gag in the cleft between his two tightly pressed knees and pull it down, or at least dislodge it sufficiently to get some sound out. I immediately began working on the same thing myself.

Meanwhile an ominous silence had descended above us. No more car door thuds, no more footsteps mincing down the aisle to their seats. The services were being held — and for someone whom Ainslie and I had every reason to believe was still alive!

The lower half of my face was all numb by now from hitting my bony up-ended knees so many times. And still I couldn't work it. Neither could he. The rounded structure of the kneecaps kept them from getting it close enough to our lips to act as pincers. If only one of us could have made it. If we could hear them that clearly down here, they would have been able to hear us yell up there. And they couldn't all be in on the plot, all those mourners, friends of the family or whoever they were. They must all be innocent dupes: all but the guardian and his secretary.

Bad as the preliminaries had been, they were as nothing compared to the concluding stages that we now had to endure listening to. There was a sudden concerted mass shifting and scraping above, as if everyone had risen to his feet at one time.

Then a slow, single-filed shuffling started, going in one direction, returning in another. The mourners were filing around the coffin one by one for a last look at the departed. The departed who was still of the living.

After the last of them had gone out, and while the incessant cracking of car doors was still under way outside, marking the forming of the funeral cortege, there was a quick, business-like converging of not more than two pairs of feet on one certain place — where the coffin was. A hurried shifting about for a moment or two, then a sharp hammering on wood penetrated to where we were, and nearly drove me crazy; they were fastening down the lid.

After a slight pause that might have been employed in reopening the closed room doors, more feet came in, all male, and moving toward that one certain place where the first two had preceded them. The pallbearers, four or six of them. A brief scraping and jockeying about while they lifted the casket to their shoulders, and then the slow, measured tread with which they carried it outside to the waiting hearse.

Then silence.

I let my head fall inertly downward as far over as I could bend it, so Ainslie wouldn't see the tears running out of my eyes. Tears of horror and helplessness and rage.

Motion attracted me and I looked blurredly up again. He was shaking his head steadily back and forth. "Don't give up, keep trying," he meant to say. "It's not too late yet."

But we never got those gags out, to the end; and we never freed our hands and ankles of those bonds, the way they so easily do in stories. Whoever had tied us up had made a good job of it.

About five or ten minutes after the hearse had left, a door opened surreptitiously somewhere close at hand, and a stealthy, frightened tread began to descend toward us, evidently along some steps that were back of me.

Ainslie could see who it was — he was facing that way — but I couldn't until the hatchet-faced maid we had seen crying in the kitchen the night before suddenly sidled out between us. She kept looking back in the direction from which she'd just come, as if scared of her life. She had an ordinary kitchen bread knife in her hand. She wasn't in livery now, but black-hatted, coated and gloved, as if she had started out for the cemetery with the rest and then slipped back unnoticed.

She went for Ainslie's bonds first, cackling terrifiedly the whole time she was sawing away at them. "Oh, if they ever find out I did this, I don't know what they'll do to me! I didn't even know you were down here until I happened to overhear Mr. Hastings whisper to his secretary just now before they left. 'Leave

the other two where they are, we can attend to them when we come back.' Which one of you is her Jimmy? She confided in me; I knew about it; I helped her slip in and out of the house that whole week. I took her place under the bedcovers, so that when he'd look in he'd think she was asleep in her room.

"They had no right to do this to you and your friend, Jimmy, even though you were the cause of her death. The excitement was too much for her, she'd been so carefully brought up. She got this heart attack and died. She was already unconscious when they brought her back — from wherever it was you ran off with her to.

"I don't know why I'm helping you. You're a reckless, bad, fortune-hunting scoundrel; Mr. Hastings says so. The marriage wouldn't have been legal anyway; she didn't use her right name. It cost him all kinds of money to hush everyone up about it and destroy the documents, so it wouldn't be found out and you wouldn't have a chance to blackmail her later.

"You killed my baby! But still he should have turned you over to the police, not kept you tied up all ni —"

At this point she finally got through, and Ainslie's gag flew out of his mouth like one of those feathered darts kids shoot through a blow-tube. "I *am* the police!" he panted. "And your 'baby' has been murdered, or will be within the next few minutes, by Hastings himself, not this boy here! She was still alive in that coffin at two o'clock this morning. You didn't know that, did you?"

She gave a scream like the noon whistle of a factory. He kept her from fainting, or at any rate falling in a heap, by pinning her to the wall, took the knife away from her. He freed me in one-tenth of the time it had taken her to rid him of his own bonds. "No," she was groaning hollowly through her hands, "her own family doctor, a lifelong friend of her father and mother, examined her after she was gone, made out the death certificate. He's an honest man, he wouldn't do that —"

"He's old, I take it. Did he see her face?" Ainslee interrupted.

A look of almost stupid consternation froze on her own face. "No. I was at the bedside with him; it was covered. But only a moment before she'd been lying there in full view. The doctor and I both saw her from the door. Then Mr. Hastings had a fainting spell in the other room and we ran to help him. When the doctor came in again to proceed with his examination, Mr. Chivers had covered her face — to spare Mr. Hastings' feelings.

"Dr. Meade just examined her body. Mr. Hastings pleaded with him not to remove the covering, said he couldn't bear it. She was wearing the little wrist watch her mother gave her before she died —"

"They substituted another body for hers, that's all; I don't care how many wrist watches it had on it," Ainslie told her brutally. "Stole that of a young girl approximately her own age who had just died from heart failure or some other natural cause, most likely from one of the hospital morgues, and put it over on the doddering old family doctor and you both.

"If you look, you'll probably find something in the papers about a vanished corpse. The main thing is to stop that burial; I'm not positive enough on it to take a chance. It may be she in the coffin after all, and not the substitute. Where was the interment to be?"

"In the family plot, at Cypress Hills Cemetery." The maid shuddered.

"Come on, Cannon; got your circulation back yet?" He was at the top of the stairs already. "Get the local police and tell them to meet us out there," he barked at the half-hysterical woman, "unless you're in this as deep as they are, yourself!"

Which was just a spur to get a move into her. You could tell by the horrified daze she was in she hadn't realized until now what was going on right under her nose.

Ainslie's badge was all that got us into the cemetery, which was private. The casket had already been lowered out of sight. They were throwing the first shovelfuls of earth over it as we burst through the little ring of sedate, bowing mourners — two wild-eyed tousled maniacs who sent them screaming and scattering in all directions.

The last thing I saw was Ainslie snatching an implement from one of the cemetery workers and jumping down bodily into the opening, feet first. I didn't see anything more after that, because everything had gone red as far as I was concerned.

The face of that silver-haired devil, her guardian Hastings, had focused in on my inflamed eyes.

A squad of Lake City police, arriving only minutes after us, was all that saved his life. It took three of them to pull me off him, and they told me later three of his ribs were already fractured by that time.

Ainslie's voice was what brought me to, more than anything else. "It's all right, Cannon," he was yelling over and over from somewhere behind me, "it's all right. It's not her. It's the substitute."

I stumbled over to the lip of the grave between two of the cops and took a look down. It was the face of a stranger that was peering up at me through the shattered coffin lid. I turned away, and they made the mistake of letting go of me.

I went at the secretary this time; Hastings was still stretched out more dead than alive. "What've you done with her? Where is she?"

"That ain't the way to make him answer," Ainslie said, and for the second and last time throughout the whole affair his voice wasn't toneless. "*This* is!"

Wham! We had to take about six steps forward to catch up with the secretary where he was now.

Ainslie's method was all right at that. The secretary talked — fast . . .

Alice was safe; but she wouldn't have been, much longer. After the mourners had had a last look at her in the coffin, Hastings and the secretary had locked her up, stupefied, for safe keeping and substituted the other body for burial.

And Alice's turn was to come later, when, under cover of night, she was to be spirited away to a hunting lodge in the hills — the lodge that had belonged to her father. There she could have been murdered at leisure, without benefit of death certificate, buried without benefit of mourners.

When we'd flashed back to the New Hampshire Avenue house in a police car, and unlocked the door of the little den where she'd been hidden; and when the police physician who accompanied us brought her out of the opiate they'd kept her under — whose arms were the first to go around her, whose face was the first she saw looking down at her?

Whose do you think?

"Jimmy!" She sighed a little, after we took time off from kissing. "He showed up late that night with Chivers, in that dinky little room you left me in in Midcity.

"They must have been right behind us all the way, paying all those people lavishly to say they'd never seen me, effacing my very existence so you couldn't make trouble for them later.

"But he fooled me, pretended he wasn't angry, said he didn't mind if I married and left him. And I was so sleepy and off guard I believed him. Then he handed me a glass of salty-tasting water to drink, and said, 'Come on down to the car. Jimmy's down there waiting for you; we've got him with us.' I staggered down there between them and got in, and that's all I remember."

Then she remembered something else and looked at me with fright in her eyes. "Jimmy, you didn't mind marrying little Alice Brown, but I don't suppose Alma Beresford would stand a chance with you —?"

"You don't suppose right," I told her gruffly, "because I'm marrying Alice Brown all over again — even if we've gotta take time off to change her name legally first. And this time there won't be any burning of the records.

"And this ugly-looking bloke standing up here, name of Ainslie, is going to be best man at our second wedding. Know why?

Because he was the only one in the whole world who believed there really was a you."

The STRIPPER

He wasn't insane, he said. He just killed because he really liked to kill.

A Lieutenant Marshall Story

BY H. H. HOLMES

He was called Jack the Stripper because the only witness who had seen him and lived (J. F. Flugelbach, 1463 N. Edgemont) had described the glint of moonlight on bare skin. The nickname was inevitable.

Mr. Flugelbach had stumbled upon the fourth of the murders, the one in the grounds of City College. He had not seen enough to be of any help to the police; but at least he had furnished a name for the killer heretofore known by such routine cognomens as "butcher," "werewolf," and "vampire."

The murders in themselves were enough to make a newspaper's fortune. They were frequent, bloody, and pointless, since neither theft nor rape was attempted. The murderer was no specialist, like the original Jack, but rather an eclectic, like

Copyright 1945 by Anthony Boucher

Kürten the Düsseldorf Monster, who struck when the mood was on him and disregarded age and sex. This indiscriminate taste made better copy; the menace threatened not merely a certain class of unfortunates but every reader.

It was the nudity, however, and the nickname evolved from it, that made the cause truly celebrated. Feature writers dug up all the legends of naked murderers — Courvoisier of London, Durrant of San Francisco, Wallace of Liverpool, Borden of Fall River — and printed them as sober fact, explaining at length the advantages of avoiding the evidence of bloodstains.

When he read this explanation, he always smiled. It was plausible, but irrelevant. The real reason for nakedness was simply that it felt better that way. When the color of things began to change, his first impulse was to get rid of his clothing. He supposed that psychoanalysts could find some atavistic reason for that.

He felt the cold air on his naked body. He had never noticed that before. Noiselessly he pushed the door open and tiptoed into the study. His hand did not waver as he raised the knife.

The Stripper case was Lieutenant Marshall's baby, and he was going nuts. His condition was not helped by the constant allusions of his colleagues to the fact that his wife had once been a stripper of a more pleasurable variety. Six murders in three months, without a single profitable lead, had reduced him to a state where a lesser man might have gibbered, and sometimes he thought it would be simpler to be a lesser man.

He barked into phones nowadays. He hardly apologized when he realized that his caller was Sister Ursula, that surprising nun who had once planned to be a policewoman and who had extricated him from several extraordinary cases. But that was just it; those had been extraordinary, freak locked-room problems, while this was the horrible epitome of ordinary, clueless, plotless murder. There was no room in the Stripper case for the talents of Sister Ursula.

He was in a hurry and her sentences hardly penetrated his mind until he caught the word "Stripper." Then he said sharply, "So? Backtrack please, Sister. I'm afraid I wasn't listening."

"He says," her quiet voice repeated, "that he thinks he knows who the Stripper is, but he hasn't enough proof. He'd like to talk to the police about it; and since he knows I know you, he asked me to arrange it, so that you wouldn't think him just a crank."

"Which," said Marshall, "he probably is. But to please you, Sister . . . What did you say his name is?"

"Flecker. Harvey Flecker. Professor of Latin at the University."

Marshall caught his breath. "Coincidence," he said flatly. "I'm on my way to see him now."

"Oh. Then he did get in touch with you himself?"

"Not with me," said Marshall. "With the Stripper."

"God rest his soul . . ." Sister Ursula murmured.

"So. I'm on my way now. If you could meet me there and bring his letter —"

"Lieutenant, I know our order is a singularly liberal one, but still I doubt if Reverend Mother —"

"You're a material witness," Marshall said authoritatively. "I'll send a car for you. And don't forget the letter."

Sister Ursula hung up and sighed. She had liked Professor Flecker, both for his scholarly wit and for his quiet kindliness. He was the only man who could hold his agnostic own with Father Pearson in disputatious sophistry, and he was also the man who had helped keep the Order's soup-kitchen open at the depth of the depression.

She took up her breviary and began to read the office for the dead while she waited for the car.

"It is obvious," Professor Lowe enunciated, "that the Stripper is one of the three of us."

Hugo Ellis said "Speak for yourself." His voice cracked a little, and he seemed even younger than he looked.

Professor de' Cassis said nothing. His huge hunchbacked body crouched in the corner and he mourned his friend.

"So?" said Lieutenant Marshall. "Go on, Professor."

"It was by pure chance," Professor Lowe continued, his lean face alight with logical satisfaction, "that the back door was latched last night. We have been leaving it unfastened for Mrs. Carey since she lost her key; but Flecker must have forgotten that fact and inadvertently reverted to habit. Ingress by the front door was impossible, since it was not only secured by a spring lock but also bolted from within. None of the windows shows any signs of external tampering. The murderer presumably counted upon the back door to make plausible the entrance of an intruder; but Flecker had accidentally secured it, and that accident," he concluded impressively, "will strap the Tripper."

Hugo Ellis laughed, and then looked ashamed of himself.

Marshall laughed too. "Setting aside the Spoonerism, Professor, your statement of the conditions is flawless. This house was locked tight as a drum. Yes, the Stripper is one of the three of you." It wasn't amusing when Marshall said it.

Professor de' Cassis raised his despondent head. "But why?" His voice was guttural. "Why?"

Hugo Ellis said, "Why? With a madman?"

Professor Lowe lifted one finger as though emphasizing a point in a lecture. "Ah, but is this a madman's crime? There is the point. When the Stripper kills a stranger, yes, he is

mad. When he kills a man with whom he lives . . . may he not be applying the technique of his madness to the purpose of his sanity?"

"It's an idea," Marshall admitted. "I can see where there's going to be some advantage in having a psychologist among the witnesses. But there's another witness I'm even more anxious to —" His face lit up as Sergeant Raglan came in. "She's here, Rags?"

"Yeah," said Raglan. "It's the sister. Holy smoke, Loot, does this mean this is gonna be another screwy one?"

Marshall had said *she* and Raglan had said *the sister*. These facts may serve as sufficient characterization of Sister Felicitas, who had accompanied her. They were always a pair, yet always spoken of in the singular. Now Sister Felicitas dozed in the corner where the hunchback had crouched, and Marshall read and reread the letter which seemed like the posthumous utterance of the Stripper's latest victim:

My dear Sister:

I have reason to fear that someone close to me is Jack the Stripper.

You know me, I trust, too well to think me a sensationalist striving to be a star witness. I have grounds for what I say. This individual, whom I shall for the moment call "Quasimodo" for reasons that might particularly appeal to you, first betrayed himself when I noticed a fleck of blood behind his ear — a trifle, but suggestive. Since then I have religiously observed his comings and goings, and found curious coincidences between the absence of Quasimodo and the presence elsewhere of the Stripper.

I have not a conclusive body of evidence, but I believe that I do have sufficient to bring to the attention of the authorities. I have heard you mention a Lieutenant Marshall who is a close friend of yours. If you will recommend me to him as a man whose word is to be taken seriously, I shall be deeply obliged.

I may, of course, be making a fool of myself with my suspicions of Quasimodo, which is why I refrain from giving you his real name. But every man must do what is possible to rid this city *a negotio perambulante in tenebris.*

Yours respectfully,

Harvey Flecker

"He didn't have much to go on, did he?" Marshall observed. "But he was right, God help him. And he may have known more than he cared to trust to a letter. He must have slipped somehow and let Quasimodo see his suspicions. . . . What does that last phrase mean?"

"Lieutenant! And you an Oxford man!" exclaimed Sister Ursula.

"I can translate it. But what's its connotation? It's an idiom?"

"It's from St. Jerome's Vulgate of the ninetieth psalm. The Douay version translates it literally: *of the business that walketh about in the dark;* but that doesn't convey the full horror of that nameless prowling *negotium.* It's one of the most terrible phrases I know, and perfect for the Stripper."

"Flecker was a Catholic?"

"No, he was a resolute agnostic, though I have always had hopes that Thomist philosophy would lead him into the Church. I almost think he refrained because his conversion would have left nothing to argue with Father Pearson about. But he was an excellent Church Latinist and knew the liturgy better than most Catholics."

"Do you understand what he means by Quasimodo?"

"I don't know. Allusiveness was typical of Professor Flecker; he delighted in British crossword puzzles, if you see what I mean. But I think I could guess more readily if he had not said that it might particularly appeal to me . . ."

"So? I can see at least two possibilities —"

"But before we try to decode the Professor's message, Lieutenant, tell me what you have learned here. All I know is that the poor man is dead, may he rest in peace."

Marshall told her. Four university teachers lived in this ancient (for Southern California) two-story house near the Campus. Mrs. Carey came in every day to clean for them and prepare dinner. When she arrived this morning at nine, Lowe and de' Cassis were eating breakfast and Hugo Ellis, the youngest of the group, was out mowing the lawn. They were not concerned over Flecker's absence. He often worked in the study till all hours and sometimes fell asleep there.

Mrs. Carey went about her work. Today was Tuesday, the day for changing the beds and getting the laundry ready. When she had finished that task, she dusted the living room and went on to the study.

The police did not yet have her story of the discovery. Her scream had summoned the others, who had at once called the police and, sensibly, canceled their classes and waited. When the police arrived, Mrs. Carey was still hysterical. The doctor had quieted her with a hypodermic, from which she had not yet revived.

Professor Flecker had had his throat cut and (Marshall skipped over this hastily) suffered certain other butcheries characteristic of the Stripper. The knife, an ordinary kitchen-knife, had been left by the body as usual. He had died instantly, at approximately one in the morning, when each of the other three men claimed to be asleep.

More evidence than that of the locked doors proved that the Stripper was an inmate of the house. He had kept his feet clear of the blood which bespattered the study, but he had still left a trail of small drops which revealed themselves to the

minute police inspection — blood which had bathed his body and dripped off as he left his crime.

This trail led upstairs and into the bathroom, where it stopped. There were traces of watered blood in the bathtub and on one of the towels — Flecker's own.

"Towel?" said Sister Ursula. "But you said Mrs. Carey had made up the laundry bundle."

"She sends out only sheets and such — does the towels herself."

"Oh." The nun sounded disappointed.

"I know how you feel, Sister. You'd welcome a discrepancy anywhere, even in the laundry list. But that's the sum of our evidence. Three suspects, all with opportunity, none with an alibi. Absolutely even distribution of suspicion, and our only guidepost is the word *Quasimodo*. Do you know any of these three men?"

"I have never met them, Lieutenant, but I feel as though I knew them rather well from Professor Flecker's descriptions."

"Good. Let's see what you can reconstruct. First, Ruggiero de' Cassis, professor of mathematics, formerly of the University of Turin, voluntary exile since the early days of Fascism."

Sister Ursula said slowly, "He admired de' Cassis, not only for his first-rate mind, but because he seemed to have adjusted himself so satisfactorily to life despite his deformity. I remember he said once, 'De' Cassis has never known a woman, yet every day he looks on Beauty bare.' "

"On Beauty . . . ? Oh yes. Millay. *Euclid alone.* . . . All right. Now Marvin Lowe, professor of psychology, native of Ohio, and from what I've seen of him a prime pedant. According to Flecker . . . ?"

"I think Professor Lowe amused him. He used to tell us the latest Spoonerisms; he swore that flocks of students graduated from the University believing that modern psychology rested on the researches of two men named Frung and Jeud. Once Lowe said that his favorite book was Max Beerbohm's *Happy Hypocrite;* Professor Flecker insisted that was because it was the only one he could be sure of pronouncing correctly."

"But as a man?"

"He never said much about Lowe personally; I don't think they were intimate. But I do recall his saying, 'Lowe, like all psychologists, is the physician of Greek proverb.' "

"'Who was told to heal himself?' Makes sense. That speech mannerism certainly points to something a psychiatrist could have fun with. All right. How about Hugo Ellis, instructor in mathematics, native of Los Angeles?"

"Mr. Ellis was a child prodigy, you know. Extraordinary mathematical feats. But he outgrew them, I almost think deliberately. He made himself into a normal young man. Now he is, I gather, a reasonably good young instructor — just run of

the mill. An adult with the brilliance which he had as a child might be a great man. Professor Flecker turned the French proverb around to fit him: 'If youth could, if age knew . . .'"

"So. There they are. And which," Marshall asked, "is Quasimodo?"

"Quasimodo . . ." Sister Ursula repeated the word, and other words seemed to follow it automatically. "*Quasimodo geniti infantes . . .*" She paused and shuddered.

"What's the matter?"

"I think," she said softly, "I know. But like Professor Flecker, I fear making a fool of myself — and worse, I fear damning an innocent man. . . . Lieutenant, may I look through this house with you?"

He sat there staring at the other two and at the policeman watching them. The body was no longer in the next room, but the blood was. He had never before revisited the scene of the crime; that notion was the nonsense of legend. For that matter he had never known his victim.

He let his mind go back to last night. Only recently had he been willing to do this. At first it was something that must be kept apart, divided from his normal personality. But he was intelligent enough to realize the danger of that. It could produce a seriously schizoid personality. He might go mad. Better to attain complete integration, and that could be accomplished only by frank self-recognition.

It must be terrible to be mad.

"Well, where to first?" asked Marshall.

"I want to see the bedrooms," said Sister Ursula. "I want to see if Mrs. Carey changed the sheets."

"You doubt her story? But she's completely out of the — All right. Come on."

Lieutenant Marshall identified each room for her as they entered it. Harvey Flecker's bedroom by no means consorted with the neatness of his mind. It was a welter of papers, notes and German works on Latin philology, puzzle books, works on Torquemada and Caliban and early missals and codices from the University library. The bed had been changed and the clean upper sheet was turned back. Harvey Flecker would never soil it.

Professor de' Cassis's room was in sharp contrast — a chaste monastic cubicle. His books — chiefly professional works, with a sampling of Leopardi and Carducci and other Italian poets and an Italian translation of Thomas à Kempis — were neatly stacked in a case, and his papers were out of sight. The only ornaments in the room were a crucifix and a framed picture of a family group, in clothes of 1920.

Hugo Ellis's room was defiantly, almost parodistically the room of a normal, healthy college man, even to the University banner over the bed. He had carefully avoided both Flecker's chaos and de' Cassis's austerity; there was a precisely calculated normal litter of pipes and

letters and pulp magazines. The pin-up girls seemed to be carrying normality too far, and Sister Ursula averted her eyes.

Each room had a clean upper sheet.

Professor Lowe's room would have seemed as normal as Ellis's, if less spectacularly so, if it were not for the inordinate quantity of books. Shelves covered all wall space that was not taken by door, window, or bed. Psychology, psychiatry, and criminology predominated; but there was a selection of poetry, humor, fiction for any mood.

Marshall took down William Roughead's *Twelve Scots Trials* and said, "Lucky devil! I've never so much as seen a copy of this before." He smiled at the argumentative pencilings in the margins. Then as he went to replace it, he saw through the gap that there was a second row of books behind. Paperbacks. He took one out and put it back hastily. "You wouldn't want to see that, Sister. But it might fit into that case we were proposing about repressions and word-distortions."

Sister Ursula seemed not to heed him. She was standing by the bed and said, "Come here."

Marshall came and looked at the freshly made bed.

Sister Ursula passed her hand over the mended but clean lower sheet. "Do you see?"

"See what?"

"The answer," she said.

Marshall frowned. "Sister —"

"Lieutenant, your wife is one of the most efficient housekeepers I've ever known. I thought she had, to some extent, indoctrinated you. Think. Try to think with Leona's mind."

Marshall thought. Then his eyes narrowed and he said, "So . . ."

"It is fortunate," Sister Ursula said, "that the Order of Martha of Bethany specializes in housework."

Marshall went out and called downstairs. "Raglan! See if the laundry's been picked up from the back porch."

The Sergeant's voice came back. "It's gone, Loot. I thought there wasn't no harm —"

"Then get on the phone quick and tell them to hold it."

"But what laundry, Loot?"

Marshall muttered. Then he turned to Sister Ursula. "The men won't know of course, but we'll find a bill somewhere. Anyway, we won't need that till the preliminary hearing. We've got enough now to settle Quasimodo."

He heard the Lieutenant's question and repressed a startled gesture. He had not thought of that. But even if they traced the laundry, it would be valueless as evidence without Mrs. Carey's testimony . . .

He saw at once what had to be done.

They had taken Mrs. Carey to the guest room, that small downstairs bedroom near the kitchen which must have been a maid's room when this was a large family house. There were still

police posted outside the house, but only Raglan and the Lieutenant inside.

It was so simple. His mind, he told himself, had never been functioning more clearly. No nonsense about stripping this time; this was not for pleasure. Just be careful to avoid those crimson jets. . . .

The Sergeant wanted to know where he thought he was going. He told him.

Raglan grinned. "You should've raised your hand. A teacher like you ought to know that."

He went to the back porch toilet, opened and closed its door without going in. Then he went to the kitchen and took the second best knife. The best had been used last night.

It would not take a minute. Then he would be safe and later when the body was found what could they prove? The others had been out of the room too.

But as he touched the knife it began to happen. Something came from the blade up his arm and into his head. He was in a hurry, there was no time — but holding the knife, the color of things began to change.

He was half naked when Marshall found him.

Sister Ursula leaned against the jamb of the kitchen door. She felt sick. Marshall and Raglan were both strong men, but they needed help to subdue him. His face was contorted into an unrecognizable mask like a demon from a Japanese tragedy. She clutched the crucifix of the rosary that hung at her waist and murmured a prayer to the Archangel Michael. For it was not the physical strength of the man that frightened her, nor the glint of his knife, but the pure quality of incarnate evil that radiated from him and made the doctrine of possession a real terror.

As she finished her prayer, Marshall's fist connected with his jaw and he crumpled. So did Sister Ursula.

"I don't know what you think of me," Sister Ursula said as Marshall drove her home. (Sister Felicitas was dozing in the back seat.) "I'm afraid I couldn't ever have been a policewoman after all."

"You'll do," Marshall said. "And if you feel better now, I'd like to run over it with you. I've got to get my brilliant deductions straight for the press."

"The fresh air feels good. Go ahead."

"I've got the sheet business down pat, I think. In ordinary middle-class households you don't change both sheets every week; Leona never does, I remembered. You put on a clean upper sheet, and the old upper becomes the lower. The other three bedrooms each had one clean sheet — the upper. His had two — upper and lower; therefore his upper sheet had been stained in some un-

usual way and had to be changed. The hasty bath, probably in the dark, had been careless, and there was some blood left to stain the sheet. Mrs. Carey wouldn't have thought anything of it at the time because she hadn't found the body yet. Right?"

"Perfect, Lieutenant."

"So. But now about Quasimodo . . . I still don't get it. He's the one it *couldn't* apply to. Either of the others — "

"Yes?"

"Well, who is Quasimodo? He's the Hunchback of Notre Dame. So it could mean the deformed de' Cassis. Who wrote Quasimodo? Victor Hugo. So it could be Hugo Ellis. But it wasn't either; and how in heaven's name could it mean Professor Lowe?"

"Remember, Lieutenant: Professor Flecker said this was an allusion that might particularly appeal to me. Now I am hardly noted for my devotion to the anticlerical prejudices of Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris.* What is the common meeting-ground of my interests and Professor Flecker's?"

"Church liturgy?" Marshall ventured.

"And why was your Quasimodo so named? Because he was born — or found or christened, I forget which — on the Sunday after Easter. Many Sundays, as you may know, are often referred to by the first word of their introits, the beginning of the proper of the Mass. As the fourth Sunday in Lent is called *Laetare* Sunday, or the third in Advent *Gaudete* Sunday, so the Sunday after Easter is known as *Quasimodo* Sunday, from its introit *Quasimodo geniti infantes* . . . 'As newborn babes.' "

"But I still don't see —"

"The Sunday after Easter," said Sister Ursula, "is more usually referred to as *Low* Sunday."

"Oh," said Marshall. After a moment he added reflectively, "*The Happy Hypocrite* . . ."

"You see that, too? Beerbohm's story is about a man who assumes a mask of virtue to conceal his depravity. A schizoid allegory. I wonder if Professor Lowe dreamed that he might find the same happy ending."

Marshall drove on a bit in silence. Then he said, "He said a strange thing while you were out."

"I feel as though he were already dead," said Sister Ursula. "I want to say, 'God rest his soul.' We should have a special office for the souls of the mad."

"That cues into my story. The boys were taking him away and I said to Rags, 'Well, this is once the insanity plea justifies itself. He'll never see the gas chamber.' And he turned on me — he's quieted down by then — and said, 'Nonsense, sir! Do you think I would cast doubt on my sanity merely to save my life?' "

"Mercy," said Sister Ursula. At first Marshall thought it was just an exclamation. Then he looked at her face. She was not talking to him.

Homecoming

So she was going out with a big hero? So she wasn't going to see him any more? Well, he could fix that. . . .

BY DOROTHY B. HUGHES

IT WAS a dark night, a small wind night, the night on which evil things could happen, might happen. He didn't feel uneasy walking the two dark blocks from the street car to her house. The reason he kept peering over his shoulder was because he heard things behind him, things like the rustle of an ancient bombazine skirt, like footsteps trying to walk without sound; things like crawling and scuttling and pawing. The things you'd hear in a too old forest place, not on the concrete pavement of a city street. He had to look behind him to know that the sounds were the ordinary sounds of a city street in the autumn. Browned leaves shriveled and fallen, blown in small whirlpools by the small wind. Warped elm boughs scraping together in lonely nakedness. The sounds you'd expect on a night in autumn when the grotesquerie of shadows was commonplace. Elm fingers beckoning, leaves drifting to earth, shadows on an empty street. The little moans of the wind quivering his own flung shadow, and his own steps solid in the night, moving to her house.

He'd be there. The hero. Korea Jim. He'd be there a long time, since supper. She'd have asked him to supper because this was her folks' night out. Her folks always went out Thursday nights, ladies' night at the club. Cards and bingo and dancing and eats and they wouldn't get home till after one o'clock at least.

Copyright, 1946, by Mystery Writers of America

She'd say it cute, "Come over for supper Thursday. I'm a terrible cook. All I can fix is pancakes." And you'd know there was nothing you'd rather eat Thursday night than her pancakes. Better than thick steak, better than chicken and dumplings, better than turkey and all the fixings would be pancakes on Thursday night. She'd say it coaxing, "If you don't come I'll be here all by myself. The family always goes out on Thursday night." And even if there weren't going to be pancakes with sorghum or real maple syrup, your choice, your chest would swell until it was tight enough to bust, wanting to protect her from a lonely night at home with the folks out.

She was such a little thing. Not tall enough to reach the second shelf in the kitchen without standing on tiptoes. Not even in her pencil-point heels was she high enough to reach his chin. She was little and soft as fur and her hair was like yellow silk. She was always fooling you with her hair. You'd get used to the memory of her looking like a kid sister with her hair down her back, maybe curled a little, and the next time she'd have it pinned on top of her head like she was playing grownup. Or she'd have it curled up short or once or twice in two stiff pigtails with ribbon bows like a real kid. Wondering about her hair he forgot for a moment the dark and the wind and the things crawling in his mind and heart; he quickened his steps to cover the blocks to her house.

Then he remembered. It wasn't he who had been invited to pancakes for supper; it was the boy with the medals, the hero, Korea Jim. By now she and Jim would be sitting on the couch, sitting close together so they'd both avoid the place where the couch sagged. Her brother, the one in the Navy, had busted it when he was a kid.

She and Jim would be sitting there close and only the one lamp on. Too much light hurt her eyes. Her eyes were big as cartwheels, blue sometimes, a smoky blue, and sometimes sort of purple-gray. You didn't know what color her eyes were until you looked into them. It was like her hair only she did it to her hair and her eyes did themselves. Her nose didn't change, it was little and cute like she was. Just turned up the least bit, enough to make her cuter when she put her eyelashes up at you and said, "Aw, Benny!" Her mouth changed colors, red like a Jonathan sometimes, sometimes like holly, sometimes like mulberries. Her father didn't like that purple color. He'd say, "Take it off, Nan. You look like a stuck pig." Red like blood. But the colors didn't change her mouth really, red like fire, red like soft warm wool. Her mouth . . .

He picked up his steps and shadows flickered as he moved. This time he didn't look over his shoulder. Nothing was back there. And beyond, a block beyond her house, he could see the blur of green light, the precinct police station house. It was

somehow reassuring. There couldn't be anything behind you with the police station ahead of you. Besides he had the gun.

It was heavy in his overcoat pocket. On the street car riding out to her neighborhood he'd felt everyone's eyes looking through the pocket and wondering why a nice young fellow was carrying a gun. He could have told them. He could have told them he was going to Nan's house though she wasn't expecting him. Though she'd told him for the twelfth night in a row, "I'm so sorry, Benny, but I'm busy tonight." Except the one night he hadn't phoned, the night he'd walked the streets in the chill autumn rain until his shoes were soggy and his mind a tight red knot.

He could have told them he was going to surprise Nan and especially surprise Hero Jim, Korea Jim. He'd find out how much of a hero Jim was. He'd see what big bold Jim would do up against a real gun. She'd see, too.

They'd be sitting on the couch so close, and the lamp over on the far table the only light. Not much light from that lamp. Her mother had made the lamp shade. She'd bought a regular paper shade at the ten-cent store for thirty-nine cents, then she'd pasted on it colored pictures of kids and dogs and handsome sailors and soldiers and marines. All put together sort of like a patchwork quilt in diamond shapes. After that she'd shellacked over the pictures and it made a swell shade. Only it didn't give much light.

When he'd ring the doorbell they'd sort of jump apart, she and Jim, wondering who it was. Wondering if her folks had left the club early, before the spread. Wondering who it could be. She'd say, "I wonder who it could possibly be this time of night." The way she'd said it the night the wire came that her brother was married in San Diego. Jim would say, "Probably your folks," just the way Benny had said it the night of the telegram. And she'd say, wrinkling her forehead the way she did when she was disturbed by something, "It couldn't be. Pop would never leave before the cheese. Unless someone's sick —"

Then Jim would go to the door. She wouldn't come because she'd be wondering who it was. Besides she was nervous at night, even walking down the street with a man she was nervous, looking over her shoulder, skipping along faster. As if she felt something was after her, something that someday would catch up to her. It might have been from her that he got the nervousness of walking down this street at night. No reason why he should be nervous. It wasn't late, hardly eleven yet. He'd only sat through half the show. He'd seen it before.

Jim would come to the door. He ought to let Jim have it right then and there. The dirty, cheating, lying —. Sitting around saying, "I don't want to talk about it, Nan."

Waiting to be coaxed. And she'd coaxed him, turning the sweet smell of her body to big Jim, handsome Jim, the hero of Korea. She got him started, bringing up things about the raid that had been printed in the newspapers along with the picture of Jim. He didn't want to talk about it but once she got him started, you couldn't turn him off. He went on and on, not even seeming to see her big blue smoky eyes, not even seeming to hear her little soft furry hurt cries. On and on, practically crawling around the floor, and then he'd stopped and the sweat had broken out all over his red face. "I'm sorry, Nan," he'd said so quietly you could hardly hear him.

She didn't say anything. She just was looking at Jim. He, Benny, had put a hot number on the phonograph, a new Les Brown, and he'd said, "Come on, Nan. Let's start the joint jumping." He'd had enough of Jim's showing off. He'd said it again louder but she didn't answer him. She sat there looking at Jim, and Jim looking at the floor. Les Brown played on and on not knowing nobody was listening to him. Benny knew that night what was going to happen. Her and Jim. And him out of it.

It had always been like that for Jim. He got everything. In High he was the one elected captain of the basketball team. He was the junior class president. He was the one the girls were always looking their eyes out at in the halls. He was the one the fellows wanted to double date with. He'd always got everything. Nan and him sitting together in assembly. Everything. When other guys had pimples, Jim didn't. When other guys had to sleep in stocking tops and grease their hair to keep it out of their eyes, Jim's yellow hair was crisp enough to stay where it belonged. When other guys' pants needed pressing and they forgot their dirty fingernails, Jim didn't. Korea Jim. The hero. Even in the war he'd come out the big stuff.

War was supposed to make all men the same. Not one guy with more stripes a hero and another guy already back in civvies. It wasn't Benny's fault he hadn't been sent over. The Army didn't say, "Would you like to go to Korea and be a hero?" They said you were doing your part just as much being a soldier in your own home town in the recruiting office. Benny had been pretty lucky being in his own home town for the war, being in clean work, in safe work. He'd thought he'd been lucky until Jim came back with all those pretty ribbons and his picture in the paper. It wasn't Benny's fault. He didn't ask the Army not to send him over; if he'd been sent he could have been a hero too. He could have led the raiders through front line fire and liberated those poor starved guys. High school kids like yourself only they were men now, old men. It made Benny shiver to see them in the news reels. It made him know he was

lucky to have been in the recruiting office, addressing envelopes and filing papers.

Even if Jim had come back a big shot hero. Jim who'd always had everything and now had this. And Nan, too. He wasn't going to get away with it this time. He wasn't going to have Nan. Nan was Benny's girl. She'd been his girl for almost two years. Jim hadn't meant anything to her those years. Just one of the gang in Korea. She didn't talk about him any more than she did about any of the other kids, wondering what they were doing on certain nights while she and Benny were out jumping and jiving at the U.S.O.

Jim wasn't going to come back and bust up Benny and Nan. He wasn't going to be let do it. He could get him plenty of other girls; there were always plenty of girls for a good-looking guy like Jim. All he had to do was whistle. Just because he'd been Nan's fellow in high school before the war started didn't mean he could walk back in and take over. Not after leaving her for four years. Jim had left her. He hadn't even waited for the draft. He'd quit high school and signed up right away.

It wasn't Benny's fault he'd had to wait to be drafted. Jim's folks had given him permission to sign up. Benny's Mom had just cried and cried and wouldn't talk about it. So he'd had to wait for the draft. Besides he wasn't as strong as Jim. He always had colds in the winter just like Mom said. Besides none of that made any difference. He'd been a soldier just like Jim. It wasn't his fault he hadn't got to be a hero. None of that mattered at all. There was only one thing counting. Nan. His girl. Benny's girl. Jim was going to find that out. Tonight.

He was there at the white cement steps, the familiar steps, gray in the night. He didn't walk on by like he had the night he walked in the soggy rain, his stomach curdled and his thoughts tied in wet red knots. Tonight he climbed the steps without breaking the firmness of his stride. Without trying to be quiet. He wasn't afraid of Jim. He had as much right here as Jim had. He continued up the short cement walk to the gray stoop, climbed the gray steps and was on the porch.

The drapes were drawn across the front parlor windows. Only the little light was on inside. He knew from the dim red glow against the drapes, almost purple-red. He pushed the bell once, hard and firm and not afraid. Like he had a right. Like he'd been pushing it for the two years since he ran into Nan at a U.S.O. party.

It happened the way he knew it was going to happen. A wait. Waiting while she and Jim jumped apart and she smoothed her hair while she was wondering who it could possibly be. The wait and then the footsteps of a man coming to the door. Of Jim. Benny's hand gripped tight on the gun in his pocket. Hold-

ing tight that way kept his stomach from jumping around. He had to keep tight so he wouldn't let Jim have it the way he ought to when Jim opened the door. The dirty, double-crossing, lying . . .

The door opened sudden. Before he was quite ready for it to open. Jim was standing there, tall and lanky in the dim hallway, peering out to see who was standing outside. Not expecting Benny. Not expecting him at all. Because his face came over with a real surprised look when he figured out who it was. Jim said, "For gos' sake! It's Benny." He said it more to her, back there in the parlor, than to himself.

Benny didn't say anything. He stepped in and Jim had to stand aside and let him pass. She was just starting over to the archway from the couch when Benny walked into the parlor. He didn't say anything to her either; he simply stood with his hands in his overcoat pockets looking at her. He didn't even take off his hat. He couldn't, not without letting her see how his hands were shaking. Keeping his hand gripped on the gun kept it steady, and the other hand a tight fist in his pocket. There wasn't any reason for them to be shaking; he wasn't afraid of anything. It wasn't because he was afraid his voice would shake that he didn't speak; it wasn't that at all. It was that he didn't have anything to say to them. Keeping his mouth shut was easy. Nan started talking the minute he came in.

She was mad. Her eyes were like sparklers and her words came out of her mouth like little spits of lead. He'd seen her mad before but just a little bit, kind of cute. This was different. If he hadn't been bigger than she, she'd have used her fists on him. If he hadn't had a gun . . . She didn't know about the gun. But he could hardly hear what she was saying from looking at her. Because she was so pretty she was like a lump in his heart, so little and soft and her cheeks bright and her mouth . . . His hand was so tight on the gun that his fingers ached like his heart. He set his teeth together tight as his knuckles so that his head hurt too, so that all the hurts could fuse and he could keep from thinking about the bad one, the inside one. So he wouldn't cry. He wanted to cry, to bawl like a kid. But he wouldn't, not with Jim standing there like he owned the parlor, like he was the head of the house waiting to see what this peddler wanted.

She was saying, "What are you doing here, Benny? You knew very well I was busy tonight. I told you that. What's the idea of coming here when I told you I was busy? And at this time of night?" He had a feeling she'd been saying it over and over again.

She was funny sputtering out words that way and not having any idea why he was here or what he was going to do. He wanted to laugh at her, to laugh and laugh until he

doubled up from laughing. As if he'd eaten green apples. But he didn't. He just stood there listening to her until Jim said, "Shush, Nan." Said it sharp, like he was giving orders to a soldier.

Benny turned his eyes over to Jim then. The way Jim had said it you'd have thought he was nervous. You'd have thought he knew why Benny had come and that he didn't want to have it happen, to be shown up in front of Nan.

Jim said, "Why don't you take off your things and join us, Benny? We're just sitting around waiting for Nan's folks to get home from the club."

As if he didn't know what they were doing. As if he hadn't known all evening every minute what they were doing. From when Jim got there at seven and she tied an apron around his waist and let him help drip the batter on the griddle. Right through every minute of it. Sitting down together in the breakfast nook and her saying, "Isn't this fun? Like —" and breaking off and looking embarrassed. That's the way she was, nice, sort of shy, not like most girls who'd say anything and never be embarrassed.

Jim said, "Come on, Benny, take off your hat and coat. We'll have some jive. I brought Nan some new records tonight. There's a swell new Tatum — have you heard it?"

Shaming him because he never brought any records to Nan. He'd have brought them if he'd thought of it. He'd just never thought of it. Nan always had the new records.

Jim didn't stop talking. He kept on like Benny was a little kid, coaxing him. "— let me have your coat. How about having a coke with us?"

Hero Jim. Asking Benny to have a coke like he was still a high school kid instead of a man. Hero Jim, the plaster saint, acting like he'd never had a slug of gin. Trying to make her think he was a Galahad and Benny a no good bum.

"— I was just telling Nan we hadn't seen you for a long time. Wondered what happened to you. Why you didn't come around."

Yeah. Sure. Rubbing salt in the wounds. That's what he learned in Korea. Scrub salt in the bleeding. Acting like it was his house. Acting like he and Nan were married. Trying to show Benny up for the outsider. Talking and talking, so sure of himself, so big and brave and handsome and sure of himself.

Nan stopped Jim. Stopped him by breaking in with a hard icy crust of anger around her soft red mouth.

"What do you want, Benny?" she asked. Hard and cold and cruel. "If you have anything to say, say it and get out. If you haven't, get out!" Her voice was like a whip.

Jim cried, "Nan!" He shook his head. "You shouldn't have said that, Nan." He was talking to her soft now, like she was the child. "It wasn't right to say that. Benny's come to see you —"

"I told him I wouldn't see him

tonight." She didn't bend to Jim. She was too mad. "He knew I was busy tonight." She turned her eyes again on Benny. They weren't like Nan's eyes, they were black like hate. "I'll tell him now to his face what I told you." The words came from her frozen mouth, each one like a whip. "I don't ever want to see you again. Now get out."

"Nan," Jim cried again. His voice wasn't steady. It was shaky. "Oh, Nan!" He twisted some kind of a smile at Benny. "Come on, Benny, sit down and let's talk everything over. Nan didn't mean it. We're all friends. We've been friends for years. Sit down and have a coke —"

Benny brought his hand out of his pocket then. He had a smile on his face too, he could feel it there. It hurt his mouth. He had a little trouble getting his hand out of his pocket. Getting it out and holding onto that thing at the same time. But it came out and the gun was still in his hand.

Jim saw it. Jim saw it and he had sweat on his upper lip and above his eyebrows. He was yellow. Just like Benny had known he'd be. Yellow. Korea Jim, Hero Jim, was scared to death.

Jim's voice didn't sound scared. It was quiet and calm and easy. "Where did you get that, Benny? Let me see it, will you?"

Benny didn't say anything. He just held the gun and Jim put his hand down to his side again, slowly, creakingly.

The sweat was trickling down Jim's nose. He laughed but it wasn't a good laugh. "What do you want with a gun, Benny? You might hurt somebody if you aren't careful with it. Let me see it, will you? Come on, let me have it."

He'd had enough. Hero Jim, standing there like a gook, like he'd never seen a gun before and didn't know what to do about it. Now was Benny's time to laugh, but the gun made too much noise. Nobody could have heard him laughing with all that noise. Even if Nan hadn't started screaming. Standing there, her eyes crazy and her face like an old woman's, just screaming and screaming and screaming. He only turned the gun on her to make her keep quiet. He didn't mean that she should fall down and spread on the floor like Jim. She shouldn't have dropped like Jim. She had on her good blue dress. They looked silly, the two of them, like big sawdust dolls, crumpled there on the rug. Scared to death. Scared to get up. Scared even to look at him. That's the way a hero acted when a real guy came around. Like a girl. Like a soft, silly girl. Lying down on his face, not moving a muscle, lying on his face like a dog.

They looked like shadows, the two of them, big shadows on the rug. When the gun clicked instead of blasting, Benny stopped laughing. The room was so quiet he could hear the beat of his heart. He didn't like it so quiet. Not at all.

He said, "Get up." He'd had enough of their wallowing, of their being scared.

"Get up."

He said, "You look crazy lying there. Get up." Suddenly he shrilled it.

"Get up."

Louder. "Get up! Get up! Get up!"

Scared to death . . . scared to death . . .

The gun made such a little noise dropping to the rug. Because his fingers couldn't hold it. Because his fingers were soft as her hair. They couldn't get up. They couldn't ever get up.

Not ever.

He hadn't meant to do it. He didn't do it on purpose. He wouldn't hurt Nan. He wouldn't hurt Nan for anything in the world, he loved her.

She was his girl.

He wouldn't hurt Nan. He wouldn't kill — He wouldn't kill anyone.

He hadn't! They were doing this to get even with him. He began shouting again, "Get up! Get up!"

But his voice didn't sound like his own voice. It was shaky like his mouth and his hands and the wet back of his neck.

"Get up!"

He heard his mouth say it and he started over to take hold of Jim and make him stop acting like he was dead.

He started.

He took one step and that was all. Because he knew. He knew whatever he said or did couldn't make them move. They were dead, really dead.

When his mind actually spoke the word, he ran. Bolting out of the house, stumbling off the stoop down the steps to the curb. He didn't get there too soon.

He retched.

When he was through being sick, he sat down on the curb. He was too weak to stand. He was like the leaves blowing down the street in the little moans of wind.

He was like the shadows wavering against the houses across the street.

There were lights in most of the houses. You'd think the neighbors would have heard all the noise. Would have come running out to see what was going on. They probably thought it was the radio.

They should have come. If they had come, they'd have stopped him. He didn't want to kill anyone. He didn't want even to kill Jim. Just to scare him off. Just give him a scare.

She couldn't be dead. Nan couldn't be dead. She couldn't be, she couldn't be, she couldn't be — He sobbed the words into the wind and the dark and the dead brown leaves.

He sat there a long, long time. When he stood up his face was wet. He rubbed his eyes, trying to dry

them so he could see where he was going.

But the rain came into them again, spilling down his cheeks, filling up, overflowing, refilling, over and over again.

He ought to go back and close the blurred door. The house would get cold with it standing wide open, letting the cold dark wind sweep through.

He couldn't go back there. Not even for his gun.

He started down the street, not knowing where he was going, not seeing anything but the wet dark world.

He no longer feared the sound and shadow behind him.

There was no terror as bad as the hurt in his head and his heart.

As he moved on without direction he saw through the mist the pinprick of green in the night. He knew then where he was going, where he must go. The tears ran down his cheeks into his mouth. They tasted like blood.

KUDOS for the KID

Suicide, Parker said. Murder, Chambers said, and proceeded to prove it.

A Peter Chambers Novelette

BY HENRY KANE

I STOPPED looking through the glass at the candies and I looked at her looking through the glass at the candies and I watched while she turned, slowly: a voltage blonde with curves.

Then she smiled. Tentatively.

Nothing else was tentative about her: not the firm-bosomed sleek-clothed figure; not the serious, long-lashed blue almond eyes; not the fragile sweep of unenquiring eyebrow nor the complexity of hat that was precisely rakish over the gold massed hair.

"How do you do?" I said, fairly feebly.

"Um."

So, on a fresh clean day on the avenue at a quarter to ten in the morning, a glow burgeoned inside of me like grouped Martinis, but quick.

"Beautiful candies," I said, intelligently. "And a lovely day."

She moved away from the window and I moved with her.

I wasn't sure — but what did I have to lose?

It was springtime on Fifth Avenue and I was a private copper without a crime or a case, which was swell by me, and the day was clear and dry and sunny and I was happy

Copyright 1947 by Esquire, Inc.

and rested and full of vitamins — so the prospect of an afternoon's idyll was just too damn lovely for words.

Only I wasn't sure.

"My name is Angelica Long," she said.

"Peter Chambers."

I held her arm, which was round and good to the touch, and all the way to Fifty-seventh Street we said nothing to each other, loudly. Then she said: "We are going to call on my father. If you don't mind."

That was a new one on me.

We went across to Madison and in the steep hotel we rode express to the tower apartment. She nibbled at the door with delicate knuckles. "He isn't well. I don't want to wake him if he's sleeping."

No one answered.

We went across the hall and she pushed for the elevator.

"My father is asleep," she said to the man. "Will you get the keys, please?"

He went away and we waited and then he came back with a solitary key on an enormous key ring which he wore around his neck like an unpulled noose and he opened the door and he bowed. We went through, and she closed the door behind us softly.

First there was a small round foyer; then there was a large rose-carpeted living room with five curved windows, open top and bottom, sheer grey curtains fluffing out quietly into the room. There was a wide, wood rocking chair, over to the right near one window, and a big man filled it, left profile, in off-blue notched-lapel gabardine, no vest, with his head down and his eyes closed and one hand over the arm of the chair, almost touching the floor. His forehead jutted and his eyes were deep and his hair was thick and white and long at the neck, spilling over on his yellow shirt, open at the throat, collar-over-jacket.

He didn't hear us.

"Sleeping," she said. "Come in here."

She walked on tiptoe, nylons glistening along tapering legs, not too slender, and she rustled faintly and excitingly; high-hipped with delicate bones and graceful.

I put my hat on the bed and I selected a chair.

She sat across from me in the cool green bedroom and she crossed her legs and I had trouble keeping my eyes away from her knees, but I managed.

"Did you bring it?" she said.

"I beg your pardon."

"Did you bring it?"

"What?"

"The earring."

"What?"

"Earring."

"Earring?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"That's what I said."

That got us nowhere, fast.

She stood up and I admired her, but nervously now, and she went to

where she had shed her bag and she took the clipping out and brought it to me: "If the lady who lost an earring at the Knights of Pythias ball Tuesday evening will meet me Friday morning between 9 and 10 in front of Fanny Farmer's at 45th and 5th, and identify her property, I shall be happy to return it."

Now I was sure: no dice.

"I am very sorry," I said.

"I don't understand."

"I balled it up."

"Please?"

"I was on the street. I stopped in front of Fanny Farmer's. I looked at candies. I looked at you. You looked at me. You know? . . ."

She retrieved her clipping, tapped it against her lips; then she smiled, not too happily, and she put it in her bag. "That's that. It is very valuable, and it is completely insured, but I'd mighty darned much love to have had it back. It was a gift from my mother."

Contrite but nosy, I said, "How valuable?"

"Each earring is insured for ten thousand dollars."

"How did it happen?"

"Why?"

I showed her my card.

"Oh," she said.

"Maybe I can think of something."

She wrinkled her nose, which is old as Eve, but it always does something new to me; that is, of course, certain noses. "I went with Oliver Tuesday evening; father was too ill. Perhaps I had that one cocktail too many. I missed the earring. We looked for it, reported it, and nothing happened until this ad appeared. The reason we came here is that I had brought the mate from my apartment — I was afraid to handle this alone — and I had left it with daddy. It would have simplified the identification. And daddy was prepared to pay a plump reward."

"Oliver?" I said.

"Oliver Logan. My brother-in-law."

I got my hat off the bed. "I'm terribly sorry."

"It was rather my fault."

"It might be remedied."

"Remedied?"

"Try putting an explanatory ad back in the same paper."

"It's an idea."

"It's the only thing I can think of."

"Thank you."

Fretfully I said, "For what?"

We went back to the living room.

I looked at the old man and I didn't like it.

I didn't like the way he hadn't moved; I didn't like the way he was impervious and unflinching to the curtain that was blowing up doodads under his nose; I didn't like the way his left hand, the only one that was visible, was still dangling over the arm of the rocking chair. I went all the way to the other side and looked at the other hand.

It was clamped around a squat unamiable automatic.

I took his chin out of his chest and I looked at his face. I lifted one eyelid. I felt for a pulse in his throat. He wasn't cold yet.

Daddy was dead. I took her to the bedroom and I told her.

I went back and I called Homicide and I looked at him again, more carefully. I couldn't find the wound. I shifted a blob of sitting-posture roll-fat over the stomach and there they were, on top of his belt, two close gun burns in the yellow shirt. I shuffled away from him, very slowly; I was working at my business. I saw the still-wet spot, about ten feet from the rocking chair toward the middle of the room, brownish on the rose carpet. I went close to him again and I put my fingers into his right-hand jacket pocket and I came up with a large beautifully faceted triangular emerald earring.

I brought it to her in the bedroom and she took it, white-mouthed and wordless, and she put it in her bag. Then she fainted. I carried her, a soft, pleasant burden, and I put her on the bed.

Detective-Lieutenant Louis Parker, black-browed, unsmiling, rugged as an omnibus and quite as wide, put the boys to work in the living room and came back to the bedroom with little Doc Blender, the medical examiner.

"How long, doc?" Parker said.

"Maybe an hour. No more."

"Means of death?"

"Stop with the lingo, Lieutenant. The guy pushed a gun against his stomach and he shot himself twice and he died. You'll have a full report with all the fancy words in the morning." He looked at Angelica Long. "I'm sorry, Miss. Good-bye, everybody."

Disgruntled, Parker said, "Look, Miss Long, would you know any reason your father had for suicide?"

"Wait . . . a . . . minute," I said, pulling it out long like taffy.

"Shut up," Parker said. "I'll come to you later."

Angelica Long said: "Yes."

She sat pillow-propped on the bed and pale, and she looked at me, and it wasn't the way I had thought about it back there on Fifth Avenue, and Parker rumbled in his throat, "Ahem," and he pulled up a chair and he turned off the brusqueness.

"Routine," he said. "If you please . . ." He asked the questions and she answered them.

There was J. Ambrose Long, a widower, sixty-four years old, and a very rich man from New Hampshire. There was his daughter, Angelica, twenty-six, and his daughter Sondra, twenty-four, and Sondra's husband, Oliver Logan, thirty-six. There was Angelica, who lived at Four Hundred Five East Fifty-fourth Street in New York City, who shopped, ate, drank and studied music; and there were Sondra and Oliver, who lived with J. Ambrose in a thirty-two room house in New Hampshire. There was J. Ambrose

again, ill of an intestinal condition which was all the way gone when they'd called in the doctors for diagnosis. So J. Ambrose had come on to New York with Oliver a week ago (Sondra had stayed home) and he had taken the tower apartment and Oliver had taken what had been offered, two rooms facing an alley on the sixteenth floor. They had planned to stay at the hotel for a month, J. Ambrose to set his affairs in order and to take a series of treatments before entering Medical Center for the operation.

Yes, he had been in pain, terrible pain. Yes, he had been depressed. Yes, I am sure he knew that he didn't have long to live. Yes, often he had talked of suicide. Yes, the gun was his, part of the baggage from New Hampshire.

"Thank you," Parker said and he wrapped up his notebook with a case-closed-and-time-for-a-drink snap of the rubber band. He stood up and he called into the living room and sent a man down for Oliver. Oliver wasn't there.

"Where's Oliver?" Parker said.

"At the Flower Show," Angelica told him. "He planned to spend the day there. He is crazy for orchids."

"To set his affairs in order," I said. "What affairs?"

"Who?" Parker said.

"J. Ambrose."

"I don't know," Angelica said.

"Lawyers in the city?" I said.

"Paigher and Paigher. In the Ward Building."

"Just one minute," Parker said. "What the devil are you doing here anyway? God. The guy's always in my hair like stickum."

"Lieutenant," I said respectfully. "The lady."

"Sure, sure," Parker grumbled. "Dave," he yelled at the living room. Dave was a courteous cop with a nose that spanned his face to the cheekbones. "Dave," Parker said. "You will take the lady home. Four O Five East Fifty-fourth. Please remain available at your apartment, Miss Long. In case. It happens we got a genius here. He is going to complain that suicide is not in the stomach. Excuse me."

She shook hands with me. Lingeringly. I was too busy marshaling arguments for Parker.

There was nobody in the living room. The boys had cleaned up and the basket had come and gone for J. Ambrose. Parker sat in the rocking chair and ate his cigar. I walked around for him.

"Maybe," I said, "you ought to call Sondra Logan in New Hampshire and inform her."

"You do it."

I called Sondra Logan in New Hampshire. Collect. I informed her.

"All right," Parker said in a slow voice like momma being patient about junior's wet pants. "So what are you doing here?"

I told him the story from Fanny Farmer's to the time I called Homicide.

"Commence," he said.

I came over and I stood in front of him and I poked at a hole in the air with my index finger. "Suicide with gun," I said firmly. "It doesn't happen downstairs."

"Yeah."

"It happens upstairs."

"Uh huh."

"In the temple. In the mouth. In the eye. Somewhere upstairs. You know?"

"I know."

"Downstairs it's murder."

"Oh. They got rules."

I resumed with the soft-shoe marathon on the carpet. "Yes. Psychological rules. People play to pattern. They shoot themselves in the head, maybe in the heart, never in the stomach. It's out of line. Maybe, even instinctively, they know that a bullet in the stomach gives with a bellyache faster than a funeral."

Parker's voice was a black radish scraping down on a grate with a handle on top. "Once," he rasped, "it can happen. Once. A guy can make himself the exception. Can't he?"

"The odds are on my side," I said. "Plus" — I pointed with my finger — "on my side, I've got that spot on the floor. Blood."

"And on my side," Parker said, "I've got a locked door."

Bleakly I said, "Please do not start with the locked-door routine. It was shut on one of those switch-button locks. You push the top button and it stays open; you push the bottom one and it locks. So the guy pushes the bottom one and slams the door behind him and it's locked."

He didn't say anything. He got up and he put the mangled cigar in an ash tray. He started to diddle with a nostril. Parker was coming around the mountain. I pressed him.

"You will admit, my dear Parker, he was shot there, where the spot is."

He slammed his palms together. "Quit it. Stop with the 'my dear Parker.' You're not Sherlock Holmes. Not you. Yet."

"So he shoots himself," I said, "twice in the stomach, over there, where the spot is; then he junkets over to the rocking chair by the open window and gets comfortable so he can die with a cool breeze on him. Is that the way you want it?"

Now Parker was walking the floor with me. No case closed. No time for a stall and a few raps of rye and a chin with the bartender. Not Parker. Parker was all cop. Maybe he hadn't seen it my way when I'd started, but he saw it my way now.

Petulantly he said, "Perhaps, also, Sherlock, you wish to chip in a statement about whodunit?"

"My dear Parker," I said. "I might at that."

" 'My dear Parker,' " he groaned and he looked at the empty rocking chair and then, swiftly, he looked at me. "*What?*"

"No what. Who."

"Who?"

"Oliver Logan. That is who."

"You know the guy?"

"No."

"Ever see him?"

"No."

"So why him?"

"Because he fits."

He rubbed an angry hand across the stiff bristle of his hair. "I'll be a black son of pitch. What are you? A comic? Or a nut? Or a Humphrey Bogart in the movies?"

"Listen," I said, "and stay with me, because I'm not too sure either. Obviously, it wasn't robbery. Right?"

"Right."

"And it wasn't a stranger."

"Why?"

"Because the guy was shot with his own gun."

"Do that over. Slow."

"Look. Suppose it's a stranger or even an acquaintance. He's gunning for J. Ambrose. So he rings the bell and J. Ambrose opens up and he lets him have it and that's that. He'd use his own gun, not J. Ambrose's."

Parker conjured up a glacial smile, then he put his pinky in the middle of it and clamped down pensively. "Yeah, but suppose he wasn't gunning. Suppose they just got into an argument, and J. Ambrose pulls the thing and the guy takes it away from him and boom boom?"

"That's my point."

"What's your point?"

"What would the guy do then?"

"The guy would blow."

"Exactly. Would he stop to fix up J. Ambrose in a rocking chair? Would he wipe off prints and arrange the gun in his hand?"

"He might. Maybe he's that kind of guy."

"All right, suppose I buy that. So, would anyone, in those circumstances, then smarten up this room so there wouldn't be one blessed sign of a scuffle? A guy that just shot a man in the heat of an argument, who figures out a fastie to make it look like suicide? I was here first and I saw this room. Nothing. You and your boys went over it carefully, experts. Nothing."

He came up close to me and he put his hands behind his back and the breath wheezed out of his nose in whistles and he spread his legs like a sawhorse. "So?"

"So do it the easy way. Someone comes in that J. Ambrose knows. Someone who knows where J. Ambrose packs the pip-squeak. Someone with a clear plan in mind. Someone who slips it out from where it's kept, holds it behind his leg and waits for his moment, and then shoves it up against J. Ambrose and lets him have it. Then he carries him over to the rocking chair, wipes the gun, sticks it into his hand. He dabs at the doorknob for prints, makes sure that the button is fixed so the door will lock, and that's that. No scuffle. No nothing. As is."

Broodingly, Parker said, "Don't stop."

"Who fits?"

"Keep on talking."

"Sondra fits, Angelica fits, Oliver

fits. Sondra is in New Hampshire, I just put through a person-to-person call, and I heard the reaction. Angelica was with me. Which leaves the guy who's supposed to be smelling orchids at the Flower Show."

"But why?"

"Let's go find out, Lieutenant."

Paigher and Paigher, Esquires, were on the thirty-first floor in the Ward Building and the girl at the switchboard was a crackerjack surprise with snapping black eyes and an off-the-shoulder blouse and a telephone operator's mouthpiece rising out of what they call decolletage.

"Very refreshing," I said.

"Whom would you wish to see?"

"Paigher."

"Which Mr. Paigher?"

"Any Mr. Paigher," Parker interrupted, unfolding leather and letting the yellow badge shine.

"Oh," the girl said. "Mr. Paigher, senior."

Mr. Paigher, senior, emerged from the recesses of the inner office: a bent, bald old man with thick glasses that put his eyes out a half-inch in front of his face. He gathered in a portion of the loose flesh under his chin and he held it in a fixed pose, observing us. Then, like a rooster with too many hens, he cackled, wearily: "Police? Police? Yes? I am at your service. Of course."

"About Ambrose Long," Parker said.

"That is Mr. Paigher, junior," Paigher said and retired.

"If you please," the girl said. "One moment." She put a plug into the switchboard and she got cozy, in whispers, with the mouthpiece. Then she smiled at us, upward. "Mr. Paigher, junior, will see you."

"Very good and very nice of him," Parker said.

"Look out for the swinging doors, ha, ha," she said. "Corridor to right, second door to left."

Paigher, junior, was moonfaced, ebullient, bouncy and hand-rubbing, with wisps of straw hair lying across his round baldness. "If you please," he said, waving at comfortable chairs.

"About Ambrose Long," Parker said.

"Yes?"

"You had business with him? Recently?"

"Yes."

"What about?"

Junior stopped rubbing his hands and he held up one plump finger. "Naughty," he said. "Policemen know the rules. It is not allowed. Attorney and client. Doctor and patient. Priest and confessor. Confidential. That sort of thing."

"Ambrose Long was murdered," I said, "this morning."

"Dead." Parker was technical. "Two bullets in the tummy."

P., junior, stopped bouncing his stern against the swivel chair. "J. Ambrose? . . . "

"You can help," Parker said with dignity. "And confidential."

"Well," Junior said. "Well."

"About the will . . . " I guessed.
"How do you know?" he snapped.
"We got a genius," Parker said. Stonily I said: "Oliver Logan told us. And how did *he* know?"

Junior slumped in his chair giving rise to his potbelly over the rim of the desk. "All right. Last week J. Ambrose came in with the request that we revoke his former will and prepare a new instrument leaving his entire fortune to specified agencies of medical research. He said his children were sufficiently provided for. Oh, that they were, gentlemen. Independently. We've been working on it; he was to come in tomorrow, Saturday, to execute it."

"So?" Parker said. "What's that got to do with Oliver?"

"Under the old will, Paigher and Paigher were executors. Under the new one, the trustees of a medical school were executors. Business. There is the matter of fees and commissions. You can understand, I believe, why I communicated with Oliver Logan in the premises. I hoped he would dissuade his father-in-law. But, please, gentlemen, *if* you please. This is utterly confidential. Ethics of the profession."

Poor Paigher. His stomach got higher over the desk line.

"When?" I said.

"When — what?"

"When did you communicate? In the premises?"

"Let me see." His eyes rolled up in thought. "Tuesday," he said. "Tuesday morning."

"How much?" Parker said.

Paigher's eyes rolled down. "Upwards, sir, of twenty million dollars."

"Good-bye, Mr. Paigher, and confidential," Parker said. "Utterly."

Outside the revolving door downstairs, Parker pushed a rueful face in front of mine. "You win. A guy kills a sick old man so his wife should inherit ten million dollars. It's reasonable, it's plausible, it's logical."

We waited for Oliver Logan in Oliver Logan's apartment on the sixteenth floor, Parker with a gun in his lap. He showed up at four o'clock and he stopped like odds-on at Belmont, key in hand, surprise creasing his face. He was tall, smoothly black-jawed, in tan tropical worsted, wide in the shoulders, and a Panama with a jaunty band.

Parker showed him the side of the gun. "Detective-Lieutenant Parker, Homicide," he said. "Don't take your hat off. You're under arrest for complicity in the murder of J. Ambrose Long," Dear Parker, always technical.

"What? Who? Ambrose? Man, are you mad?"

"Downtown," Parker said, "we will discuss it. Let us go, bub."

I rode down with them, and I pointed a thumb when we got there and Parker knew what I meant. I meant the Lonesome Bar and Grill across the street from Police Headquarters. I went there and I said hello to Luke McCool, my favorite

bartender in all the world: Luke McCool who looked like a grizzly bear with a shave, and Luke said, "Hi, Chambers."

"Luke," I said. "What do you know about stingers?"

"Me? I know everything about stingers. What'll you have?"

"Stingers. Two of them. Double. Wrap them up for me down there in the last booth, rear. I'm waiting for Parker."

"Sure thing."

I sat in the back and I sipped my stingers and I thought about Oliver Logan with sweat on his face under the lights in the hard room. It figured for about two hours. When cops know you done it, brother, and you're an amateur, you'll be a wise guy for part of the way, but then you'll admit it, all the way down to the bottom, unless you're very smart and you've figured a very smart out for yourself, long in advance.

Stingers later, the case comes up and hits me in the head like a beanball at the ball game. I fled the Lonesome Bar and Grill and at the frosted-glass doors I shouted back at Luke McCool: "If he comes, tell him to wait."

I got a cab outside and I said, "Fast. Four Hundred Five Fifty-fourth, East."

"Fast?" he said.

I showed him the buzzer.

"Cop," I said.

"Cop?" he said.

"Cop," I said.

"Let's see that again."

I showed it to him again.

"Private cop?"

"Right."

"I'll go slow."

We got there and I paid him, and for a tip I gave him a brilliant smile, and in the lobby I looked under the bells until I came to A. Long. I pushed and it clicked and upstairs she opened the door for me in black silk pajamas. A stylish blonde in silk pajamas, with sheen, has no effect on me whatever — neither does a Mickey Finn or a declaration of war or a scream in the middle of a dark night in a cemetery. I said, "I'll take the earring."

"But . . . "

"Look. It's important."

"But . . . "

"Look. I'm not going to steal it. If I was going to steal it I would have stolen it when I found it in your father's pocket. For goodness sake."

"Yes, but . . ."

"Look. I'm in a hurry. I'm working on a thing. I've got an outsize hunch I'm going to turn up with the other one. You wouldn't want to queer that? Now would you?"

"No, but . . ."

"Look. What are you worried about? You told me yourself the damn thing's insured."

Luke McCool said, "He ain't showed up yet," and I said right back at him, "How's with stingers?"

"With stingers it is swell."

"So set me up. Double-headers.

Back there in the dungeon."

I trifled with stingers and after a long while Parker came and poured himself into the other side of the tight booth and he hung up a silent face in front of me that was longer than a lover's kiss.

"What's the matter?" I said.

He glared at the champagne-size cocktail glasses.

"What's that?"

Resolutely eupeptic amidst small belches, I said: "Stingers."

"Stingers," he said witheringly. "Luke," he howled. "Rye. Double. Soda."

"'Kay," said Luke.

"What's the matter?" I insisted.

"It's up the creek, that's what's the matter. It is strictly for the pigs." He snatched the double off Luke's tray and he drank it."More," he said. "'Kay," said Luke.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"The matter is nothing. Except the guy has got an out." "My dear Parker," I said. "How?"

He parted the cocktail glasses and he reached a hand through and he pulled me over by my bright long tie. "You will stop with the 'my dear Parker.' I am not in the mood." He released the tie and I settled in a snug corner and I listened. "This," he said, "is how. We give him the once-over-lightly and right away he sings. Only he doesn't sing the way we want him to sing. He sings like he practised. He tells us about the call from Paigher; so a few days later, which is today, early, before he goes to smell the orchids, he drops in on the old man."

"A real nice stinking son-in-law. What I mean."

"About nine o'clock in the morning. He starts trying to talk him out of charitable donations, and the old man gets sore, and pretty soon they're mixed up in an argument. And it gets worse. Very worse. So then the old man goes and gets out his useful old gun and he waves it around and he starts calling him names and he tells him that he married his daughter because he's what you call a fortune hunter. So now the son-in-law gets sore and he starts trying to take the gun away from the old man and there's a tussle and before you know it, bang, bang, the old man winds up with two in the belly and he's an angel. Accident, says Oliver. Only he's scared and he sits down and thinks, and he fixes it up for a suicide because he don't want trouble and he wants to be smart, and that's the way you found old J. Ambrose."

"You believe that?"

"Like hell I do."

"Then add it up, Lieutenant."

"I already added it up. It smells, net and gross. But we strike out, anyway."

"Luke," I yelled. "Fix the man up." To Parker I yelled: "Why?"

"Quiet. The D.A.'s man is there and he says strike-out, too. There isn't even enough evidence for an indictment, let alone a conviction. You and me, we're what you call

criminologists, but the Grand Jury, that's people. You and me, we know you can't clean up after that kind of scuffle, even the way he himself tells it, especially not on a red carpet, unless you're an expert with hours and hours to do it. But with the Grand Jury, that's slick bull detective stuff, and they don't go for it and I don't blame them. And if we ever got him into court, which we couldn't, what have we got against a guy who 'fesses up with sadness and is penitent: he got scared, which is natural enough, so he tried to fix it to look like suicide because he don't want trouble, he's a married man and all that. But basically, his shyster tells them, no crime has been committed, ladies and gentlemen. There was an accidental shooting and it's too damn bad, or good, for an old man which is very sick. That's his story, and for what you call refutation, we got bubkiss. *There is no witness.* There is only him."

Parker produced a sigh like the tail end of a fire siren, then, dourly, he dispatched his rye. He looked toward Luke at the bar. Luke was busy.

"The boys go over his rooms?" I said.

"Of course."

"Anybody come up with a baggage check? Or a key to one of those check-boxes?"

Parker looked from me to stinger and back to me. "No."

"Anything like that on him?"

"No. We didn't find a thing.

I killed the stinger. With a flourish.

"I have a witness," I said.

Parker ignored me.

"Murder," I said. "First-degree murder, premeditated murder, and calculated; with a witness that's going to square down that guy's backside flush in the chair."

"You," Parker said, "are very drunk."

I took out the emerald.

It brightened up the saloon.

"Stingers," I said. "You drink stingers and you stop thinking fancy. You think common sense. It's all there. It's only how you look at it. With stingers, after a while, you look at it with common sense. Listen. Did you ever hear of anybody finding an earring and putting an ad in the paper telling you to meet them in front of Fanny Farmer's on Fifth Avenue between nine and ten? Never, you did. People don't do it. They give you a phone number, or an address or a box to write them a letter. Check?"

Parker's jaw grew lumps like the calves of a ballet queen. "Check," he said.

"There it is," I said. "The guy knows he won't be able to talk the old man out of it. Paigher calls him Tuesday morning and puts eggs in his head. All day long they rattle around incubating. Indiscriminately."

"Stop with eggs," Parker said. "Talk English. But fast and please."

"And then that evening at the ball, he hatches one. She's wearing her expensive earrings. So he feeds her a few extra and he clips one with a fast pass. Then he puts an ad in the paper; he's the one that probably brought it to her attention (we can check on that later). So now, between nine and ten Friday morning, the day before the old man is supposed to go down to sign the new will, he's got Angelica posted out in front of Fanny Farmer's — the one person in town that could possibly barge in and crimp it. He's got a full hour to pull it, uninterrupted. So he pulls it. Like we figured it back there talking in the tower apartment, and he blows. And here is your witness."

I twisted dangling green fire in front of him.

"How?" Parker said, with hope. "Where do you think this came from?"

"How would I know?"

"*From Oliver Logan's two rooms to the alley.*"

"*Wh-a-a-t?*"

"We go, Lieutenant," I said, "from common sense to psychology. Different words — same thing. People act like people. Nobody throws away ten-thousand-dollars'-worth of bauble. There are a million good hiding places, safe in your own rooms — from the classic down-the-drain to sticking it into your favorite cake of soap. He wasn't worried; figured his suicide plant for a cuckoo; in a week, he'd be packing for home."

I squeezed out of the booth and I gave him the earring.

"Go on up there and shove it down his throat. But good."

So I waited again, patiently, in the Lonesome Bar and Grill and I traded stories with Luke McCool, when he had the time, and I narrowed down to single stingers, but when Parker came and slapped me on the back, with enthusiasm, stingers shook in me, gurglingly, all the way up to the larynx.

"Got him," the Detective-Lieutenant gloated, bangingly. "Got him, got him, got him. Full confession. The works."

I sipped my drink. I was stiff as the waxed ends of a grand duke's mustache. Swiftness had gone out of stingers. Onion soup in a long-stemmed glass. "All right," I said. "I will take me emerald."

"You crazy? It's impounded. It's evidence."

"That's not the one."

"Come again."

"Not the one."

"Once more," he said, with hyphens. "But slow."

"That is not the one. That is the mate. The one that the fair Angelica retained."

"*What?*"

"I pushed for the jack pot with a slug, sort of. If I was wrong, you'd be the blushing fall guy. Not me. I'd be an ossified cop in a back booth, swacked on stingers and psychology. Not too much risk."

"Do it slower," Parker said. "If you please."

"I wasn't sure he had the thing in those rooms smack-dab against the alley. That is only what I thought. So I had to put it over on you while it was hot so you could put it over on him and shove it up his eye before a smart lawyer got him out of the pokey and into the conference room and talk, talk, talk, and wisened him up to the kind of dynamite he had tied to his pinky, so he could drop it in the river for him first chance he had time. So now you take a couple of your boys and spread open those hotel rooms and find me the emerald. Because now it's got to be there — otherwise you wouldn't have that confession you're so busting proud about. Then you give it to me and I give it to Angelica and you keep the one you've got. Impounded. For evidence. Who knows the difference? *So the guy fries on the wrong earring.* Good for him."

Parker was rigid and silent for a moment and then he rapped the meat of his hand flat down on the bar, which can give you the jumps for a week if you're drinking, and he roared until the crocodiles came. "Great. Swell. Good. Marvelous. Today you have really been working. Call me 'my dear Parker.' Any time."

"Kudos," I mourned to my stingless stinger. "Kudos for the kid. Blah. And blah."

"Cuties?" Parker said with interest. "What's with cuties, and who is the kid?"

"Kudos," I said. "Glory, approbation; and I am the kid. Figure of speech."

"I don't get it."

"I'm a detective. Remember?"

"Who says no?"

"A professional detective."

"Still who says no?"

"A professional detective doesn't work for kudos."

"Now I get it."

"So this one's on the house," I said sadly. "For free."

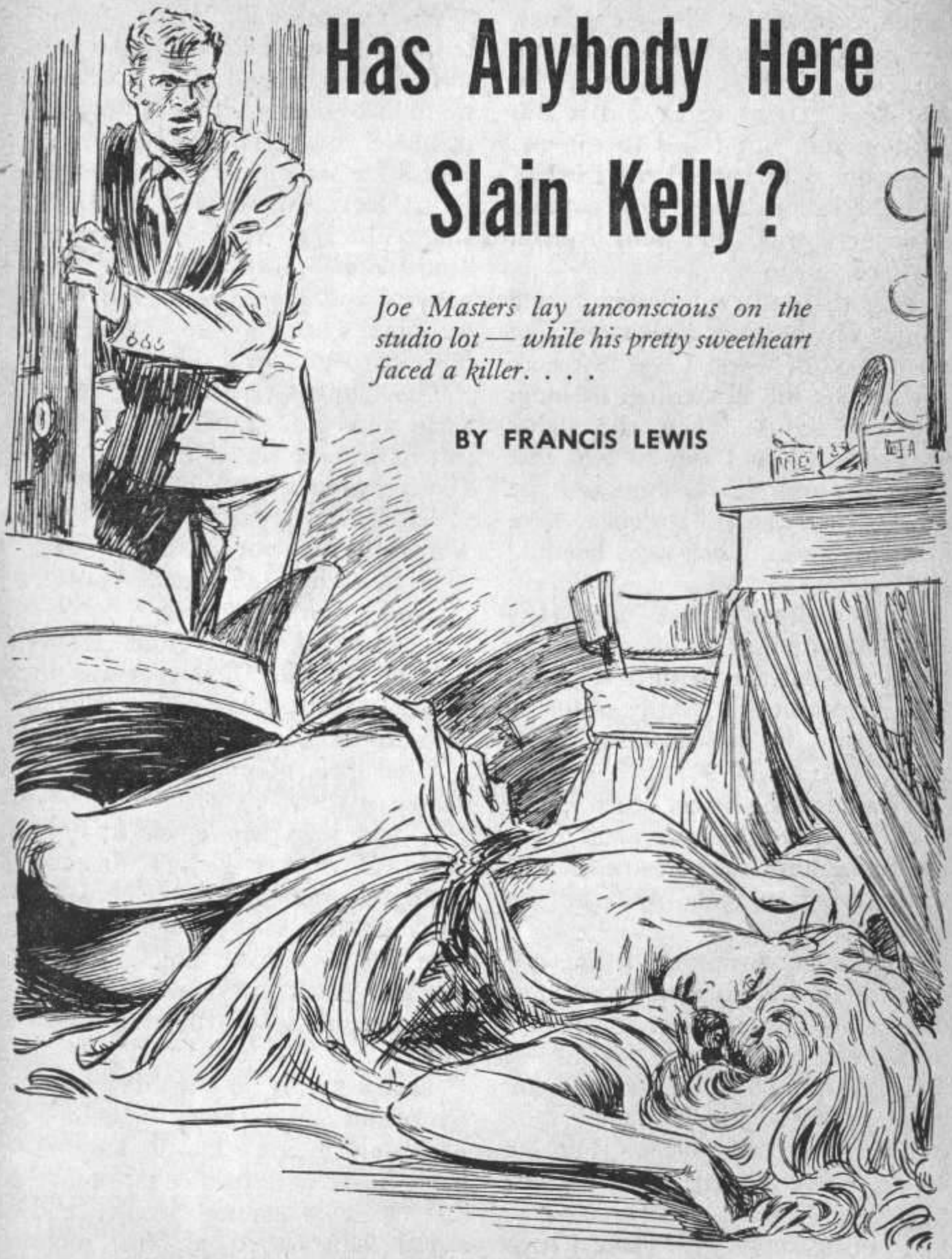
Parker took time out for performance with double rye. He grunted and he wiped his mouth. "Not entirely, I wouldn't say. Not the way that Angelica cookie was batting eyelashes at you. Or didn't you notice?"

My dear Parker . . .

Has Anybody Here Slain Kelly?

Joe Masters lay unconscious on the studio lot — while his pretty sweetheart faced a killer. . . .

BY FRANCIS LEWIS



Copyright from Ten Detective Aces, 1949, by Magazine Publishers Inc.

EVERYTHING was all right at first, but then the ground under me turned into soft marshmallow. My feet kept getting stuck and it was hard to run, but I had to run because the skeleton and the cowboy and the ballet dancer were coming after me. I tried, and went over on my face.

I lay there a few minutes, trying to get my bearings and wondering what kind of world I was in where the air was full of sizzling, flashing, blinding lights. Then the lights cleared away and the air was just plain air, and the skeleton and the cowboy and the ballet dancer were with me again. They were bending over me.

The skeleton spoke first. His voice was funny because it was so usual — nasal and with a touch of Brooklyn, out of a death's-head.

"What's the matter, mister?" he said. "You sick?"

I stared at the blurry death's-head and the painted bones up and down his frame until they steadied, and I said, trying to grin, "What're *you* made up for?"

Before he answered, I knew — because I was beginning to feel better and I remembered where I was. I was just outside Stage C at *Olympus Studios*, and the skeleton and cowboy and ballet dancer were walk-ons in the Dance Fantasy scene being filmed that day for *Aurora's Horses*.

I cut his reply off: "Have I been out for a long time?"

The skeleton said, "Why — why, ten minutes maybe. We figured you was takin' some kind of fit . . . and we didn't know whether it was safe to move you or not. Sometimes it ain't." He stared as I started to get to my feet. "Maybe you better sit still, mister. You smacked your head fallin' down. We saw you weavin' and ran over to you, but we weren't fast enough. One of the boys just went for a doctor . . ."

The lights were coming back again and the ground was feeling soft once more under my feet, but I forced myself to stand erect.

"Nothing," I said, forcing the words thickly out of my throat. "It's nothing . . . touch of . . . dizziness. Can't wait now."

I stumbled away from them, fighting the black hole that was up to my knees and was trying to pull me in to the eyes. Fighting, fighting . . . an inch, another inch, a foot, couple of yards. . . .

It was less than a block from Stage C to Liz Kelly's dressing room, but to me it was like crawling on your stomach through barbed wire for a million miles. But I couldn't black out now, not with Liz's telephone call still fresh in my ears.

Then I was at the row of dressing rooms and pushing open the door to her room. I didn't knock; I didn't have the strength to knock. I pushed and went staggering inside, and stared bleary-eyed at the room around me.

It was no good. It was no damn good at all. I might just as well have skipped the dragging, struggling crawl to her dressing room, and gone on sprawling outside Stage C on my face.

Liz Kelly was lying at my feet, her beautiful body twisted and stiff with death. A bullet up close had blown away part of her head.

Liz Kelly. Elizabeth Kelly to her fans, and there had been millions of them — millions of kids and grown-ups and old people who ran to see her pictures and walked away raving each time.

Liz Kelly. Twenty-four, and medium-tall and straight and slim and long-haired blonde and sweet.

Liz Kelly, corpse.

Ten minutes dead; part of her head shot away while I was draped outside Stage C counting flashing lights. It wasn't easy to take.

I discovered suddenly that I was wilting again and I fought away the black mist, forced myself to think. And even through the fog, one thing came out clear as spring-water:

When the dizziness had hit me outside C, I'd figured I was coming down with something — malaria, maybe, making a return visit, something like that. Now I knew that it was malaria in a pig's eye. No, my dizziness was a lot less accidental than the sudden return spurt of an old Army disease, turning up just in time to slow me down so someone could give Liz a passport upstairs.

No, it was simple, simple as hell when you looked right at it. Someone had overheard or listened in on Liz's urgent call to me and had given me a quick spurt of knockout juice in my luncheon coffee so that I wouldn't get to Liz until she was past the talking stage.

Well, I thought wryly, leaning against the wall to support myself, that ought to make it a cinch. Nothing to it. Even a tired studio private bull like you ought to be able to figure this one out. Just figure out who could have gotten to your coffee and you've got your killer.

Nice and easy. There were only about sixteen hundred people in the commissary at lunch time. Bit players, technicians, writers, producers, actors, actresses, visitors. And with glad hello's and table-hopping the second most popular sport in Hollywood, next to chasing the opposite sex, that narrowed the field down very nicely. Only about — say — fifteen hundred and ninety of them could have put the drops in the coffee.

I cursed bitterly and staggered over to the phone. I dialed L. A. Homicide and, in a voice that was harder and harder to get out, I told Bryans there what had happened.

Then, all at once, it was too much for me. I retched, staggered blindly forward, and hit the floor with my face.

I was lying on a couch and my face was soaking wet and someone was saying my name, over and over.

"Joe," the voice said. "Joe Masters." Over and over again.

It began to annoy me. I said, "Go to hell."

A rag slapped me limply in the face, and I was wetter.

"Joe," the voice said again. "Joe boy."

I opened one eye and looked around a little. Bryans was leaning over me, breathing beer down my neck. I was still in Liz's room.

It woke me up. I opened the other eye.

"Liz," I said.

Bryans looked at me, gentle for such a big guy. "You feeling better, Joe?"

"Liz," I said hoarsely. "Someone got Liz. She's dead on the floor there."

"Not any more, Joe," Bryans said gently. "The medics took her downtown." He breathed down my neck again. "She was a nice kid, Joe. Who got her?"

Ice filled my throat. I'd been groggy before, but now I was awake and strong enough to hate.

"I wouldn't be here if I knew, Bryans," I said.

"You liked her, didn't you, Joe?"

"A little," I said bitterly. "Like you, like a casual friend. That's why we were getting married next Sunday."

"I didn't know about that, Joe," Bryans said.

I turned away from him. "Let it pass."

He was silent for a minute and then he said, "We'll get the guy who sent her out, Joe — but you got to give us a hand. You got to tell us what you know. What were you doing in her dressing room in mid-day? I always heard Miss Kelly was nervous at lunch time when she was shooting a big scene, and she hardly saw anybody."

"She sent for me, Bryans," I said. "She phoned me at the commissary and I took the phone right at the table, like a big shot, so everybody could hear. Only I didn't know she was going to ask me to rush right over because she was in some kind of trouble — danger was the way she put it . . ."

"Go on, Joe."

"There isn't much more. I rushed right over, but on the way I got sick." I told him about it, about the coffee, about the fact that there wasn't the chance of an icicle in a hotbox of getting the guy who did it on the basis of opportunity. "Only," I finished, "I got here too late."

He looked thoughtful. "Who hated her, Joe?"

"Nobody," I said.

"That's crazy, Joe," he said. "Everybody's hated by somebody. I guess maybe you're the wrong guy to ask a question like that."

I sat up, shook my head to clear it.

"Look, Bryans," I said, "the fact that I was going to marry her hasn't got a damn thing to do with it. Bryans, you've been around this

town a long time. You know movie stars. They make a bunch of grand a week, so they marry other movie stars who make a bunch of grand a week, or they marry millionaires or other kinds of big shots. They don't marry private eyes who peddle their guts for a mere couple of hundred bucks a job."

"Liz was going to marry a private eye, this private eye. She was going to marry me because she loved me and because I loved her. That's the kind of gal she was. . . ."

Bryans put up a hand. "Now don't get sore, Joe."

"I'm not getting sore," I said. "I'm just trying to show you what kind of gal she was so you can understand this damn thing and lick it if I don't.

"Bryans, this burg is loaded with phonies and bushwah-artists and guys and dames out for themselves and the hell with everybody else. But every once in a while someone completely decent turns up. That was Liz. She got where she was by ability, and not by making a ladder out of other people; and she never did anyone dirt in her life. That's why nobody hated her — nobody."

He looked convinced, and more gentle than ever. "All right, Joe," he said. "If you're up to it, let's get out of here so I can lock up the joint. I want to do a little nosing around."

I left him. I told him I felt like hell and wanted to go home. I didn't go home.

Because even while I'd been telling him about Liz, funny thoughts had been pushing and shoving around in my mind. Thoughts like this: You don't have to be a punk and a louse to have people hate you. Sometimes people hate you because you're just the opposite.

People, I thought — and I walked a little faster because I thought it — people like Gwen Christie, who'd lost a number of important parts to Liz because Liz was a hell of a lot better actress, and who had hated Liz's guts for it.

And Dickie Lawrence, who managed Liz's publicity, who made no secret of that fact that he was hanging onto his job because he needed the dough, but hated Liz because she would never agree to the stunt publicity he was always thinking up.

Or people like Martin Rennick, top producer at *Utopia*, who had a wife and a couple of kids but spent more time making other women than making movies, and hated Liz because he had never been able to get anywhere at all with her.

Or Tommy Del Rey, the great screen lover, who made women swoon off the screen as well; and the ones he chased hardest were the not too many who didn't go for him. He hated Liz most because she had been his biggest failure.

Maybe you don't think people kill for reasons like these. Maybe, brother, you don't know a damn

thing about exaggerated emotions in Hollywood.

I went to the commissary first, and the information I got there was just about right to make me want to kick my leg into a wall up to the knee. I knew that all four of them — Gwen Christie, Dickie Lawrence, Martin Rennick, Tommy Del Rey — had been at the commissary when I was there. I'd seen them myself. But the information I got fixed that up fine. All four had left minutes after I had; all four had gone off in different directions.

Lovely. That pinned it down: in a horse's fetlock it did.

I went to make the rounds.

Gwen Christie's dressing room was located just down the road from the commissary. She got the pleasure of my company first. She answered the door herself, and she took my hand and went inside with me and then she turned to face me.

"Joe," she said, "I've just heard. I'm so sorry." She came up close to me as she said it. Close as wallpaper to a wall.

She always stood close when she talked to a young and, she possibly figured, impressionable man. It was part of her character and her stock-in-trade and the reason for her success. She made every man in the theater feel as though she were sitting on his lap during the entire performance, and after her pictures the men's lounge would be full of harassed gentlemen dipping their heads under the cold water spigots.

Her face was dark and passionate-looking, and she had hot, dark eyes, and long black hair. She had the kind of tall figure you see in those dreams you later discuss with your psychoanalyst, and she made it look twice as wonderful by wearing dresses two sizes too tight.

All in all, she made you feel as if the top of your head was floating around by itself in mid-air.

It was easy to look at her and forget everything else you had on your mind. But not today. I said, "Gwen, let's you and me have a little talk."

She stepped over to a little love seat in one corner of the room, sat down on it, and motioned to the space beside her. I sat down, and she moved over so close she was almost on my lap, and her fingers began to play, carefully, absently, with my earlobe.

"Gwen," I said, "I don't have to tell you how I felt about Liz. I'm out to get the guy who killed her. How about giving me your picture on who did the job?"

"I don't have any pictures," she said quickly. "I don't have the faintest idea. I was so shocked and horrified when I heard it."

I interrupted her harshly. "Save the pretty lines for your pictures," I said. "You wouldn't be shocked and horrified if the Archangel Gabriel put down his trumpet and chased you around the room. You're among friends, Gwen. How about your private opinion?"

"Private opinion for a private eye," she said. "All right. I'd cast my vote for Old Man Rennick."

Martin Rennick. One of my candidates. I looked interested.

"How do you figure?"

"The figuring's easy when you remember that he gives her looks that yearn at her and hate her at the same time every time she passes. It looks to me like he got desperate and followed her into her room; she put up a fight, maybe there was an angry scene, a lot of emotions thrown around, and he lost his head and blasted her. That's how it looks to me."

I thought it over. "It's a hell of a good possibility, anyway. I won't pass it up." Her lips were close to my neck now, but I kept my mind on business. "And now, just for the record, where were *you* after lunch today?"

She jerked away from me, and her face was suddenly white and strained and harsh. "You're out of your mind," she said.

"I told you it was just for the record."

She laughed, a forced laugh. "I came right here after lunch — straight here — and I haven't left this place since. I have a two-thirty call." She laughed again, but this time, unaccountably, it was a long and bubbling laugh, full of humor, as though she'd just thought of something which amused her immensely.

"Besides," she said, "I haven't been worrying too much about my career lately. I've got a brand-new boy friend who's been keeping my mind plenty occupied."

"Anybody I know?" I asked.

She laughed again, hilariously. "Stick to your beat, private eye. Worry about your case."

"Sorry," I said. "No offense." I stood up. "And if I'm to be worrying about the case, I'd better be moving along."

The wolf-girl came out in her again at that, and she pulled me back beside her.

"Wait a minute," she said softly. "Now that you're here, why don't you stay and rest a while?" She spaced the words, her mouth a little open, the tip of her red tongue darting between her teeth.

Well, it was like this. I was sick and I was tired and I was burning with hatred for someone I couldn't even name, and I was all mixed up and didn't know where I was going, and those are the times when you're weakest. And her lips were very close to mine, and her eyes were half closed, and her chest was heaving faster and faster, and maybe you can whistle blithely when you walk through a graveyard but my emotions don't control quite that easily. At least not right now, when my nerves were as jagged and turbulent as a bolt of lightning.

I pressed my lips to hers and her body to mine. I was there all in all about half an hour.

The opportunity for which I'd

been waiting turned up in mid-stream. Around the fifteen-minute point she went to the powder room, and I went quickly and expertly through her furniture. I was looking for something interesting, and I found something interesting.

I found a little envelope tucked away under some lingerie in a chest of drawers. It was empty and it was just an ordinary little cream-colored envelope, but it had Liz's name and address printed on the flap, and it was part of a stationery set I'd given her the evening before.

I was feeling a little better when I went out of there.

Across the road and down the hill from the Commissary, there is a building which is all white marble and ultra-modern design, and just a shade smaller than the Hollywood Bowl. It could house a couple of dozen families or so. It houses just one man, Martin Rennick, and his various satellites.

I entered the outer office and told the blond dish behind the reception desk that my name was Masters and I was investigating the death of Elizabeth Kelly. She bent over to write my name on a card, and I could see she really was built and very decorative as a receptionist.

"Wait here," she said. "I think he's in conference just now, but I'll try."

He was in conference. I could tell that by myself because she got to the door and jerked it, and it didn't move.

"He's locked his door on the inside," she told me. "You'll have to wait."

"Pleasure," I said.

I sat down in an easy chair which sank a foot and a half when you slumped into it. I sat and I watched the entirely visible charms of the receptionist, and I listened to the inside of Martin Rennick's office.

His conference wasn't a happy one. I could hear his deep voice rumbling and growing louder and louder in anger, and every once in a while he shouted a word or two that would have made a lady blush but bothered the receptionist not a bit.

There was another voice, too, a low and insinuating voice which I couldn't hear well enough to recognize. It said maybe two words to Rennick's fifty, but you could tell that Low Voice was the master of the situation.

Then I heard Rennick say, "All right, all right. Now get the hell out of here." Footsteps retreated out of my hearing — probably toward one of the private exits to Rennick's inner office.

I got to my feet. "Conference is over," I said.

It was. The receptionist tried again, and this time the door swung open. She went inside and was gone about a minute and a half. She came out flushed.

"He'll see you, Mr. Masters," she said.

Martin Rennick looked like Humpty Dumpty before he fell off

the wall. He was a stomach topped by a bald head. He had glittering black eyes and a habit of licking his lips when he was nervous.

He was nervous now. His tongue worked like a pendulum of a clock.

"Poor Liz," he said, looking at me. "I liked her very much."

I stared at him, hard, and my mind said, *You ought to be on the radio, you little punk, the way you tell stories. You hated her because she wouldn't look at you.* But I didn't say it; I was being polite for the moment.

I said, "Who do you think did it, Mr. Rennick?"

"Did it?" he said. "Why ask me? I don't know a damn thing about her personal life" — his lips twisted — "if she had one. Why come to me?"

"You knew her pretty well, didn't you?"

The familiar glitter came into his eyes under the nervousness.

"Just to look at, actually," he said. "She was quite a tomato. Boy, for a babe like that —"

He stopped because his feet weren't on the floor any more. He was hanging in the air, supported by my left hand.

"How would you like to end up with your chin three feet into that wall?" I asked.

He began to sputter. "This is my office — my company —"

"She was my girl, Fatso," I told him. "Watch your lip."

I put him down and he began to wave speechlessly toward the door. I said, "Remember one thing, Fatso. You're Number One suspect on this job."

His face grew whiter. "Me?" he said. "You're crazy. I never left this office after lunch." His voice trailed off as he stared at his private exits.

"Yeah," I said. "I'll be seeing you again."

I slammed the door behind me, didn't even look at the receptionist, and began to walk toward Tommy Del Rey's dressing room. It was just inside the Jungle that the two men caught up with me.

The Jungle is *Olympus Pictures'* attempt to prove that, though only God can make a tree, mere man can make a forest. The Jungle was its pet name, but actually it was a five-block square forest which was used for shots where it wasn't quite necessary to go off on location.

I walked into it with my head so full of thoughts that I didn't even stop to think that when nothing was being filmed it was lonelier than the Frisco dockyards after midnight.

The two men were cut out of the same mold. They were both tall and blond and good-looking in a boyish sort of way, and they both looked like Richard Widmark playing gangster parts except that the bulges under their armpits contained real bullets instead of blanks. I recognized them right away — Rennick's "associates." Bodyguards, musclemen, with a fancy title.

The bulge came out from an arm-

pit and was a gun in one guy's hand. It was a .45, big and black, and he held it like he didn't intend to use it for cracking nuts.

"We want to talk to you, guy," the other bird said.

I played it tough. I slouched against a tree and said, "You're talking, guy."

"Just got one thing to tell you, guy," he said. "Mr. Rennick don't like nobody snooping around him."

"No?"

"No. Mr. Rennick don't like you, neither, and guys he don't like sometimes end up with broken arms and legs and maybe a couple of teeth knocked out."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Mr. Rennick don't like it at all."

I looked at him for a minute, and managed to grin.

"Well," I said, "let me put it this way. That's the saddest damn story I ever heard, and I positively bleed for Mr. Rennick. But you just trot back and tell Mr. Rennick that I'm going to keep snooping around until the guy who killed Liz Kelly is sniffing a noseful at San Quentin."

"You mean that, guy?"

"Guy," I said, "I mean it like anything." And I straightened up and balled my fists.

It went off nicely. When you ball your fists at a rodman he does one thing automatically — he gets ready to use his rod, and he's got a big rod like a .45 with a kick like the atom bomb, he pulls his arm over to his side to tense it. His arm had been out in front of him, pointing the gun, and it passed his stomach en route to his side.

Quick as hell I unballed my right fist, grabbed the muzzle of the gun and pushed forward hard. The gun went into his stomach and wind whooshed out of his lungs and he was wide open for a second. I used my left to follow it up.

He went down, groaning, and his rod was out of his hand into mine before his pal could stop blinking. I used it to play a tune on the other guy's head and he lay down, cozy and nice, right alongside his pal.

"Guys," I said to their sleeping bodies, "I keep snooping." I emptied the gun, threw it down on the ground, and walked away.

Well, maybe Rennick was worth another confab before I went on to Del Rey and Lawrence. He had looked nervous when we talked before, and his sending his boys didn't make him out a brave, calm lad either. Anyhow, it was worth another try.

I went back to Hollywood Bowl's kid brother. The girl at the reception desk was out trimming her fingernails or something, but the other girl on duty had a figure that was worth a whistle too. I ignored her worried yapping and pushed through into Rennick's office.

Rennick was sitting at his desk, his head in his hands. He looked like he was almost crying.

"I just came back to tell you to

pick up your boys, Fatso," I said. "They're enjoying a quick snooze out in the Jungle."

He was more nervous than ever. His tongue was doing double duty over parched lips, and his face was white and his eyes hollow. He said, "Leave me alone, Masters. I'm sick."

I walked toward him. "You're going to be sicker in a minute," I said. "I don't like guys who send guys to threaten me."

Then I stopped, because I had had a sudden thought.

"Rennick," I said, "who was that in with you when I was waiting last time?"

I watched his face grow old before my eyes. His cheeks sagged and his lips began to tremble. I thought suddenly, *This is what he's really afraid of. Not so much being accused of Liz's murder. This. The guy with the low voice.* Rennick didn't say a word.

I said, "Rennick, if you're in trouble of some kind, you'd be smart to tell me about it. If it's connected with Liz, I'm bound to smell it out anyhow."

"No," he said, his voice a croak. "No, please . . . No . . ."

"Don't be a damn fool," I said. "I'm not stopping until I get Liz's killer. Tell me about it, Rennick. If it isn't connected with Liz, I'll keep it quiet, and maybe I can give you a hand."

"That's just it," he said. "I don't know. I —" He stopped and took hold of my shoulder with a trembling hand.

"Look, Masters," he said, "I'm frightened — I'm going crazy — I don't know where to turn. Maybe it would be best to tell you, I don't know. But I've got to think." His whole body was shivering now. "Masters, do me a favor — go out and sit in the reception room for a few minutes. Let me sit here and think this out. I'll call you in as soon — as soon as I've decided. . . ."

I went. Nothing, no intuition, came to me, and I went as he asked me to, and I sat down and waited, watching the door and the secretary and back to the door again.

I had been sitting there for about ten minutes when I heard the shot. I didn't stop to think but rushed to the door and slammed against it. It didn't give. It was locked, and it was heavy.

It took three hard heaves to knock it down. I finally got it open and rushed into the room. I didn't have to be a medic to see that Rennick's secret was going to stay with him. He had very little forehead left.

There was a difference this time. There'd been no gun in Liz's room. There was one now, clasped tightly in Rennick's right hand.

It looked like suicide.

Belatedly, and just for the hell of it, I opened the three doors which led out to Rennick's private exits and looked down them. Not a thing. I followed one down a long corridor and it opened out into *Olympus's*

main thoroughfare. Fat chance of getting witnesses to tell me anything — there were other exits alongside, and it could have been anybody, just coming out and mixing with the crowd.

I went back into Rennick's office and it still looked like suicide. It was certainly possible: Rennick sits there and broods about his troubles and finally he pulls his heater out of his desk drawer and gives himself the lead treatment.

With a handkerchief I pulled the gun out of his hand and broke it open. Even before I looked I knew I would find two bullets fired, though I'd heard only one shot. It would take ballistics to prove it, but this, brother — and I'd bet on it — was the rod that had killed Liz.

It shaped up smooth and believable. A guy gets a yen for a girl, the kind of yen that drives him crazy, and he sneaks into her room and tries to play up to her. She puts up a fight, maybe gets hysterical, threatening to expose him or some such thing, and he loses his head and cools her. Then he broods about it, decides the quick way out is better than the gas chamber, and blows his brains out. It sure looked like suicide.

To me, it smelled like murder.

Sometimes you forget little things. You find a perfect opportunity to murder a guy who's dangerous to you, and you rig up a deal to make it look like suicide, and you forget he's a left-handed guy and stick the shooting iron in his right hand. Stupid, but it happens. It's so obvious, it's bound to happen more than you think.

The receptionist's assistant had fainted on the floor just outside the door. I stepped over her and used her phone to call the studio police. I told them to locate Bryans and send him over to Rennick's office.

Then I went on my way.

I went to Tommy Del Rey's dressing room.

I didn't find Tommy Del Rey.

I found Dick Lawrence, bending over a chair inside Del Rey's dressing room. Dick was so busy doing something to it that he didn't even hear me come in.

"Hey!" I said.

He jumped up and made a sort of squeaking sound. He was a little mouselike guy who squeaked all the time.

He said, "Oh, it's you. I thought it might be Del Rey."

"What in hell are you doing?" I asked.

A silly grin spread over his face. "Just installing this," he said, pointing. He had a round black object, sort of a cushion, in his hand and he was busy inserting it under the cover of the chair.

"This is the Squealing Surprise," he said. "Hell of a funny thing. You put it on chairs and people sit on it, and it makes a loud burping sound. Scares the wits out of them."

He thought it was so funny he almost doubled over.

That summed up Lawrence, characterized him in a nutshell. A jerk who spent half his time playing silly practical jokes on people. He probably spent twenty per cent of his salary each week on gimmicks like the Squealing Surprise.

It was an effort to say it mildly, but I said mildly, "Sweet time to be schmoing around playing jokes on people — with Liz's body hardly cold."

His face sobered immediately, but you could tell it was an act of duty. Well, after all, I thought, he's one of your suspects because he hated her; what can you expect?

He said, "Yeah — poor Liz. I can't believe that it's really happened. Poor, poor kid. I can imagine how you feel, Masters."

"Knock it off," I said. I waited a second. "Same guy got Rennick, too, Lawrence."

His voice turned into a shrill scream. "Rennick! Holy Hannah, *when?*"

"Couple of minutes ago. Same rod. Tried to make it look like suicide, but it won't wash. Rigged it up okay but put the gun in the right hand when Rennick's a leftie."

I watched the color wash out of his face. "Nobody's safe around here," he yapped. "Nobody. Where — where did it happen?"

"In his office."

He scrambled to his feet. "I'm going over there. There'll be cops — protection. Maybe it's a homicidal maniac. I'm going over . . ." He scuttled out of the room, his Squealing Surprise forgotten.

I went to work on the room, and in Del Rey's chest of drawers I found what I expected to find. A little lucky gold locket that Liz never took off.

It was shaping up.

I went on the prowl for Del Rey.

Turnabout, they taught me when I was a kid in school, is fair play. I had found Lawrence in Del Rey's room. I found Del Rey in Lawrence's.

He wasn't playing with practical jokes. His well-shaped handsome face was twisted bitterly and he was going through the desk methodically and carefully. He was cursing in a steady stream.

"Find it yet?" I said.

He jumped up. "Masters!" he said.

"The same," I told him politely. "What are you looking for, Tommy?"

His face grew ugly. "What's it to you? What in hell's your business?"

"I'm investigating Liz's murder. Anything screwy going on is my business."

He spit a nasty word at me.

I stepped closer to him. "What were you looking for, Del Rey?"

"Go to hell," he said.

I reached out and took hold of his arm and twisted it behind his back. I gave it pressure. "I'm getting sick and tired of playing around. What were you looking for?"

Tears of pain started in his eyes,

but he didn't say anything. I gave the arm more pressure. Still more.

"All right," he yelped. I released the pressure. "He stole something from me, the little joke-playing rat, and I wanted it back. That's all I'll tell you. You can break my arm, but that's all I'll tell you."

He meant it, I could tell that. "Okay," I said. "Scoot."

"What?"

"Scoot. Vamoose. Beat it. Scram. Take the air."

"But—"

"I said scoot. I'm going to give this place a going-over myself, and if there's anything to be found, I'll find it. If I find something of yours which doesn't concern Liz, you'll get it back and my mouth will stay closed. If it does, it's just too damn bad for you."

His shoulders slumped. He was licked. He gave me a look which put neat curls in my back hair, and he slammed out of the door.

I got busy.

That's the trouble with these amateurs, they look for something which they consider valuable or important and they look in places like desk drawers. From the look of things, Del Rey had been searching for at least ten minutes. I found what he wanted in two, pasted on the inside rear wall of the desk, where you had to pull out the drawer to see it.

It was a neat picture. It was a nice flash-photo of Del Rey and a gal I didn't recognize, and they seemed to be very friendly. My eyes dwelt on the girl for a minute or two, and then I put the picture in my pocket. I went back to my search.

In a suitcase which I had to break open, I found another photo which interested the hell out of me. This wasn't a flash job—it was one of those careful, painstaking things by Hugo of Hollywood, the kind that grace magazine covers and are forwarded to fans who send two bits to the studio for return postage.

It was Gwen Christie, wearing just enough of a black negligee so that the Johnson office would pass the shot, but not enough so that the fans wouldn't get collar-wilt.

Gwen's handwriting was sprawled in white ink across the right-hand lower corner. The writing said:

To my dearest Dickie, with love for you alone, from your Gwen."

I remembered Gwen's comment about her interesting new boy friend, and her derisive laughter as she said it. I tied it in with this photo, fit the romance of the Amazon and the Mouse into the general scheme of things, and it looked about ready to wrap up.

I sighed, stood up, wiped the dust off my trouser legs, and went to the phone. I asked to be connected with Mr. Rennick's office and told the copper who answered to put me on to Bryans. The homicide dick came on with a bellow.

"Masters," he roared, "where in hell are you? Everywhere you go somebody gets murdered, and I

can't even locate you to ask you what the —"

I cut in wearily, "The yap, Bryans."

"Huh?"

"The yap. Shut it. I'm ready to wrap this up for you."

It stopped him. We've worked together before. "Yeah?" he said eagerly.

"Yeah," I said. "Just do this— send your boy scouts out to round up Tommy Del Rey and Dick Lawrence and Gwen Christie, and hold them there for me."

"Lawrence is here now," he said, "and we've already sent for Gwen Christie. I hear old Rennick used to be one of her boy friends."

"Everybody was a boy friend of Gwen's sometime or other," I said. "But hold her when she comes, and get Del Rey, too."

"Will do."

"All right," I said. "I'll be over in a couple of minutes." I was.

Lawrence and Gwen Christie were there waiting for me when I arrived. A couple of minutes later a cop came in walking politely beside Tommy Del Rey. That put all four of my suspects in the room with me, including the one who was no longer a suspect, Rennick. He was still lying on the floor.

I was thinking, getting things in order, when Bryans' deep voice cut in on me.

"All right, Joe," he said, "they're all here. Let's get on with it."

"Here we go," I said.

I turned and looked at Gwen and Lawrence and Del Rey. They were all staring at me, all scared as hell. In a few minutes, I thought, one of them will be a lot more scared.

"When I first started thinking about this thing," I said, "when I first tried to pick a few possibilities out of the hundreds of people who ate with me in the commissary, I singled out four good prospects. Gwen, because Liz was always beating her out of parts. Rennie, because he was always trying to make Liz and never could. Lawrence, because she was always frustrating him by turning down his lousy ideas; and Del Rey for the same reason as Rennick.

"Well, I was right about it being one of them. But not for any of the reasons I had figured out. . . ."

"Get on with it, Joe," Bryans said.

"Easy, Bryans," I told him. "I want this thing wrapped up completely so it'll stick. . . . Anyhow, I did the thing any copper does when he's mixed up — I started to nose around generally. And I came upon two things which seemed to me to connect up just right. Two things — Gwen was going around with Dickie Lawrence, and Lawrence was a practical joker."

Bryans said, "What the hell —"

"Let me tell it," I said. "A little while ago I told you that almost everybody was sometime a boyfriend of Gwen's. Let me correct that . . . anybody who looked pret-

ty good or who had lots of dough, because Gwen spends dough so fast she's always broke no matter how much she makes. But Lawrence is a runty little punk and he doesn't make much dough. How does that figure?"

I answered myself. "I'll tell you how it figures. It figures that Lawrence was getting dough from some place outside his job, and Gwen was laughing at him but stringing along because she loves dough." I looked at Gwen. "Maybe you figured he was borrowing dough until he was up to his ears in debt, or maybe you just didn't give a damn where he got it as long as he had it. But he was always flashing plenty of green, right?"

Her face was pasty. She pointed to a ruby bracelet and a diamond ring on her finger. You could sneer at the diamond — it wasn't even as big as an apple. "He gave me these. And — and other things."

Lawrence was starting to get to his feet, and I yanked out my gun and pointed it at him. "Easy, pal. There's nothing I'd like better than to start shooting."

He sat down again.

I said, "Ruby bracelets and diamonds like baseballs and other things on a salary of maybe three-four hundred a week. Nice stuff. I figure his other income began because he's a practical joker. You know the way it is with practical jokers — they leave stink bombs here and artificial mice there, and you get so used through the years to seeing them sneaking in and out of places playing practical jokes that you hardly give it a second thought.

"That's the way it must have happened. Lawrence must have sneaked into Rennick's office to pull some kind of gag — maybe in one of Rennick's desk drawers — and then stopped dead because he had come upon something incriminating to Rennick. What was it, Lawrence? Rennick been playing the market with company dough?"

Lawrence's mouth opened and spittle like miniature bubbles formed on his lips. His eyes were slow poison but his mouth was wrapped in silence.

"You can find out easily enough," I told Bryans. "Anyhow, this was Lawrence's chance to get friendly with the big-shot babe he'd been ogling for a long time, so he collared the thing and began to bleed Rennick for everything he had. And there it was."

Bryans said, "Then why the murders?"

"Use your head, Bryans," I said wearily. "Liz found out about it somehow. I'll take a stab at the how. This Lawrence punk is so dumb he might even have mislaid the evidence against Rennick, and maybe it turned up in a bunch of publicity sheets he gave Liz. It didn't take Liz long to figure out what was going on."

It was difficult to talk right after that, thinking of sweet little Liz

dying so a runty blackmailer could continue his romance with a no-good dame like Gwen. But I had to wrap it up for Bryans so I went on:

"So Liz called Dick Lawrence in and accused him of it, and he must have threatened her and run out of the place ranting and screaming. Liz sat down to think it over and then she called me — and that was when he overheard it and slowed me up and killed her.

"That slowing up, by the way, was my first clue to the fact that the killer was Lawrence. When I tried to figure out who had had the opportunity to dope my coffee, I couldn't get to first base because it could have been almost anybody. But that was why I was up the wrong tree. Instead of worrying about who had the opportunity to drop the stuff in my coffee, I should have been wondering who would just happen to have the stuff on the spot to drop.

"The funny-boy practical joker, of course. He must have gotten hold of the stuff somewhere and been thinking how funny it would be to watch people drop off to sleep right in the commissary. And then he suddenly had a more urgent use for the stuff."

"And the Rennick knock-off?" Bryans asked.

I held up my hand. "It follows right along," I said. "When I was sitting outside Rennick's office waiting to get in to him, I heard him arguing with someone. That someone, I realize now, was Lawrence; and Rennick must have figured out the reason for Liz's death and was getting scared about it and tough to handle. Finally Rennick must have cooled down, but Lawrence still felt uneasy about it, so instead of going away he hung around outside the door of the private exit, waiting and thinking. And he heard Rennick right on the verge of spilling the whole story to me.

"He had Rennick's own gun with him — he'd probably swiped it when he stole the evidence that day, because now he was a blackmailer and he wanted to feel tough with a gun and all. And he saw a chance — a chance to 'solve' Liz's murder for the police and shut up Rennick at the same time. He was really in the blackmailing business now, anyway — in his room I found a picture of Del Rey and some gal who probably has a tough husband — so he wasn't too worried about the loss of income from Rennick.

"He waited until I went into the ante-room, then he came back and held the gun on Rennick while he locked the door. Then he shot Rennick, framed up a quick suicide — and made the mistake of putting the gun in the wrong hand at the same time — and beat it."

Lawrence was squirming in his chair, looking sick and beaten. I looked at him with contempt. "You weren't even a smart criminal," I said. "You planted red herrings at Gwen's place and Del Rey's, and

you framed Rennick with the gun you used on Liz, but you didn't even have the sense to plant a frame in your own place. Those things were so obviously frames — why in hell else would a killer carry away useless stuff like an empty envelope and a locket? — that they pointed right toward the one guy who was too innocent.

"You might as well take him away, Bryans. And if I know this master criminal here, you'll probably even find the Rennick evidence in his pocket."

I even had him there — I could tell by the look on his face. And then, as I watched him, he grew silent and still.

Too silent. Too still. The look of a guy who is about to try to make a break for it.

You understand that this was the guy who had killed Liz, my Liz. You understand. You would have done the same thing in my place. I let the gun droop carelessly, and I turned my head away toward Bryans.

And then Lawrence was on his feet, his breath gasping, and he was clawing inside his coat pocket. I'd noticed the bulge when he walked in. Another rod.

I turned my head back, casually, and I fired at his stomach, a bullet deep in his guts where it would hurt the most. He dropped his gun and he put his hands on the place where blood seeped out, and he began to cry, a shrill sick cry like a kid alone in the dark. I grinned at him and I fired again, and then once again, and I kept firing into his belly until there weren't any more bullets in my gun.

Then I got to my feet and dropped the gun on the floor and went out of there. Outside, I was sick on the sidewalk, and later I went away to a place where the drinks were good and I could wash the taste of filth out of my mouth.

TERRIFIC!

That was your verdict of our first issue so: We are extending our original subscription offer to enable you to be sure of getting the next twelve issues of VERDICT.

Please send me the next twelve issues of **VERDICT** for which I enclose
....check
my ....money order.....for $4.00.

Name.....

Address.....

Mail Subscriptions to:
VERDICT, **545 Fifth Ave., New York 17, New York**

Elsa was timid around men. When they stared at her, she wanted to hide. Then, one day, the salesman came to the door. . . .

BY

SAMUEL BLAS

REVENGE

TWILIGHT is settling in the valley. Far below us pale lights are beginning to flicker and the spreading pattern of the city slowly comes alive. As the winding road narrows to the mountaintop the motor sound grows louder in the thin air, within the enclosing silence through which we move.

In the pale blue haze on my left the deepening dusk mingles with the vast silence that seems to suspend the day. A square yellow sign ahead blazes in our headlights: DANGER! SHARP CURVE AHEAD. The mountain wall leans close to the road. On Elsa's side the low branches of a solitary tree rush by, scraping the top of the car.

Elsa, too, is part of the surrounding silence. Beside me she stares straight ahead at the highway. For a long time now she has not spoken; she neither smiles nor is sorrowful. Her expression is grave, almost serene, as if there were no such things as tears or laughter.

But this morning she smiled. A half day's journey away, in the cool

Copyright, 1947, by Crowell-Collier Inc.

morning of a quiet glade, she stepped from our trailer door and smiled softly as she waved me off to town. She blushed when I turned back a step to kiss her again. And when I finally drove off, the sweet touch of her hand still tingled in my palm.

Life was wonderful. I drove happily to the small town near by to buy provisions. We had decided to stay a few days more in this pleasant spot we had found. There could be no better place to finish out our honeymoon. As I neared the town I thought it would be fun to add a gift for Elsa to the stuff that I would carry back to the camp.

It was nearing lunchtime when I started back. I had piled groceries enough in the car to last us a week. While I waited for a traffic light to change, a newsboy came by. I bought a paper. It carried a headline reporting the capture of an escaped convict near by. The subcaption said that his companion was still at large. "Presumed Hiding In the Woods Near Campbelltown."

I ran quickly through the rest of the item. When the light turned I moved out fast and put on speed. Campbelltown was a place that lay beyond our camp, but too near to suit me, in the circumstances. I felt uneasy, with Elsa alone in the trailer. It was possible, of course, that the fugitive convict might be in our vicinity; but what disturbed me more was the thought that Elsa might have picked up the news on our radio. If she had, she would be frightened. I stepped on the accelerator.

The road twisted and turned around thinly wooded ridges and hills, and as I swung each curve I chided myself for leaving Elsa alone. I reminded myself that she had insisted I shop without her. "I have a surprise for dinner," she had said with the only artfulness she knew — a shy, secret smile. My attention returned to the road.

The winding turns ended and the last stretch was a long, straight drive sheltered by a canopy of tall trees that somehow eased my anxiety. Not much further now. I imagined the way she would welcome me. She would staunchly deny that she had been afraid but she would hold my arm tightly. And then all of a sudden she would forget the whole thing. She would smile happily and tell me to close my eyes. How I loved that smile!

In the short while that I had known her and in the single month of our marriage I had grown to cherish that smile and the soft, rich laughter that sometimes accompanied it. So strange, that warm directness with which she shared my life, for in the presence of other men there was only shyness. I think that she was afraid of men. Something in her slender glowing warmth made their blood stir. She knew that, faintly, innocently. When the bold ones stared at her she would ask me to hold her close and never tell me what need made her ask.

The sun was near high noon when the road broke out of the trees into the clearing. I rolled onto the grass and parked, feeling relieved because I had come so quickly. I pulled up the hand brake and looked to the trailer, expecting to see Elsa's welcoming figure there. My complacency ended. There in the clear fall sunlight I saw wisps of smoke about our home, thin plumes slipping through the unlatched door.

Wild red leaves fluttered across the grass. And a wavering silence to which I listened stupidly. Then I ran to the door and swung it open violently.

An acrid fog swirled about me, making me choke and cough. A curling heavy mist clung to the ceiling. I swung the door wider and flailed my arms to clear the air. And as the fog lifted and shifted I saw with some relief that there was no fire. Our dinner was smoking and burning upon the stove. Three chops — I can see them yet — shriveled and black in a blackened frying pan; string beans in a burning pot, brown where the water had been; and in the oven, where I later found it, a crumbling burnt blob that must once have been Elsa's first cake — the surprise she had promised me.

Panic got hold of me.

"Elsa!" I called.

There was no reply.

"Elsa!" I repeated. "Elsa!"

But only the crackle of the burning pot answered me, and outside a thin echo wandered in the woods. I shut off the burners. The crackling persisted as if in defiance, then it ceased. I turned uneasily toward the door that led to our dining alcove in the rear, stopping short at sight of the waiting table with its knives and forks and plates in neat array. But no Elsa. But of course. She wouldn't, she couldn't have been there or the dinner would not have burned.

Trying to understand what had happened I rejected a dozen answers at once. She would never have left the dinner, to burn for any sort of errand. Nor were there neighbors about with whom to fall into forgetful conversation. We were alone. Then as I stood there in the silence I suddenly heard that faint sound, a rising and falling as of someone weakly breathing. Behind the curtain that secluded our bed — Elsa!

I faced about and tore aside the curtain —

There she lay. Pale, still. I kneeled beside her. She was barely breathing.

"Elsa," I whispered.

She seemed neither to move nor to make any sound, yet I knew she was breathing, for I had heard her. I rubbed her wrists and temples. I shook her gently, then fearfully. She stirred a little.

I wanted to get a doctor, yet I was afraid to leave. Then I remembered the brandy. I fumbled in the cupboard and my hand trembled as I poured a glassful and spooned a little between her lips.

At last it took effect. Her lips

moved. Her expression altered, she sputtered, she coughed, and her eyes opened weakly.

At first they were blank. A long second passed while I held her hands tightly. Then, as if awareness had just touched her, horror filled her eyes and she moaned.

Then as I gathered her into my arms and let the sheet that covered her fall away, I saw that she was naked — completely.

There were bruises on her body, as if someone had beaten her: cruel bruises on her shoulders where callous fingers had pressed; angry marks where heavy fists had struck her.

Those numb moments beside my wife are not easily recalled, filled as they are with shame and a fierce anger. When at last she stirred again in my arms I held her tight and looked beyond her so that she would not see the anguish in my eyes. For long minutes she shivered; then she sobbed pitifully. Finally the tears and trembling stopped.

In a flat voice that frightened me she said, "*He killed me . . . he killed me.*"

How I gathered the tangled threads of those dreadful hours I cannot entirely remember. For a long time I cradled and comforted her, as though she were a child. After a while she seemed to respond. But then, when she shuddered again, my indignation mounted; I lost control and stormed at her with furious questions: "Who?" I demanded. "Who?" and "When?" and "How?" Until haltingly the brutal story came out. How a salesman knocked —

"A salesman?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure? Did he carry a suitcase, a display?"

"Yes."

A salesman. Then it was not the convict. Nothing reasonable. It was an ordinary man, ordinary.

How he knocked, interrupting her cooking; how he smiled patly and edged inside, eyeing her boldly while he chattered about kitchenware. How he touched her arm and seized her and how when she resisted he beat her and — and how she finally fainted away.

As she talked she seemed to fall under a spell of horror that produced in her a curious calm. She repeated, "He killed me, he killed me . . ." until I had to shake her to make her stop. Her eyes, I saw, stared straight ahead as she said over those dreadful words and it seemed as though she saw that man, that menacing figure, in the hopeless distance.

I never thought once of the police. Only one impulse was in me, a dreadful agonizing craving for revenge. "I'll find him!" I swore. "I'll kill him . . ."

Her hand clutched mine as if to restrain me, but when she felt the anger in my grip her mood abruptly changed and she said quietly, "Yes . . . yes." And when I hesitantly asked whether she would come with

me, help me find him, she nodded, almost eagerly, I thought.

We drove to the outskirts of the town, where she listened carefully to my instructions, nodding with a sort of unearthly calm.

"We'll drive slowly," I told her. And this we did for perhaps a half hour, examining every passer-by as we moved back and forth through the unhurried streets. The sun still hung heavy above us as we turned a third time down the town's main artery.

In the wide street were a few parked cars, and a thin afternoon crowd was lazily inspecting the shop windows. A man lounging near the hotel disinterestedly picked his teeth. It seemed to me he observed our slow progress curiously. I directed my wife's attention to him but she gravely shook her head. Then suddenly she gripped my arm. Her lips fell open and her face paled. She pointed at a shabby car parked near the hotel. A man was locking the car door.

"*That's him!*" she whispered.

My blood quickened.

"Are you sure?" I asked finally. Her eyes followed him as he put the keys in his pocket and turned toward the hotel.

"*That's him*," she insisted, "*that's him . . .*"

I pulled to the curb in front of his car and stepped out quickly. "Wait here," I said. "Don't move—" I looked about me with assumed carelessness. The lounger, I saw, was facing the other way. No one else seemed to notice me. I sauntered into the lobby, a few steps behind my man. I decided to wait for him near the elevator, and sure enough he was soon standing beside me absently fingering his room key.

Luck was with me, for as the car went up I glimpsed his room number on the key in his hand. I had planned to get out with him and openly follow him to his room. Instead I rode to the floor above his, made my way to the stairway, down one level, through the hallways to his room and knocked softly, an unexpected and unknown visitor.

I was calm then as he answered my knock. I spoke to him through the door and represented myself as the buyer for a local store. He opened the door wide.

"Why, come in," he said; he wore a welcoming grin that infuriated me.

I went in, took the hammer from the waistband of my trousers and, as he turned to walk ahead of me, I smashed him mightily on the back of his head.

A great cry escaped him; then a dismal sigh that collapsed with him to the floor. He lay still.

I stared at the crumpled figure and my fury subsided, spent by that single avenging blow. A clock ticked into my consciousness. My eyes wandered absently to the simple dresser, the bed, the silent telephone. In my hand the hammer was edged with blood. I tucked it back

in my trousers and dropped the skirt of my coat over it. With my handkerchief I turned the knob of the door. Curiosity prompted me to glance again at the still figure on the floor, but I no longer cared. It might be hours before anything happened. I might be suspected or I might not. None of these conjectures bothered me. I was reasonably safe from suspicion; that I knew; except perhaps from this — this ordinary individual. I turned and went out quickly, closing the door behind me. And with that closed door behind me, in that quiet carpeted hallway, I at last felt clean, free of obsessing shame.

I went back upstairs, rang for the elevator and rode down quietly. The very sleepiness of this town made my ambling exit from the hotel unnoticeable.

Elsa was still in the car, patient, gazing straight ahead, just as I had left her.

"It's done," I said.

Her head barely turned in my direction and she nodded slowly. She said one word: "Good."

Poor Elsa. So altered with shame and shock that she had grown a shell which I could not pierce. She sat silently in the car while, back at our camp, I hooked up the trailer. The lunch I fixed for her she barely touched, staring into space. Perhaps away from this terrible place . . .

It was evening when we stopped again. I drove furiously past a dozen small villages, hurrying toward the city that lies, now, below and behind us at the foot of the mountain. I hoped to find in its busy streets some distraction from our lonely secret, to lose some of this horror there, perhaps in some lively bar or in a theater; perhaps in a good night's rest. Then the strain of the dreadful day took charge. A good night's sleep was all I craved. But not in the trailer; not yet.

Elsa agreed indifferently. We rolled ahead and merged with the traffic in the city. We would park the trailer and stop at the best hotel. We would have a hot bath, then dinner in our room and perhaps a bottle of wine. And a good sleep, a good sleep . . . "Would you like that?" I asked her.

I thought her expression softened; certainly a tear glistened in her eye. I wanted right then to hold her in my arms, to caress her and comfort her. I pointed to a hotel we were approaching.

"Would you like that one?" I asked.

Her glance followed my pointing finger. She paled. She gripped my arm tightly and her lips parted. She stared straight ahead. Oh, God! She stared straight ahead and pointed at a man in the street —

"*That's him*," she whispered. "*That's him . . .*"

Fer-De-Lance

Everybody knew Barstow had been murdered. Then why, Wolfe wondered, would they try to shield a killer?

A Nero Wolfe Mystery

BY REX STOUT

PART II

What has gone before: Fred Durkin, *one of* Nero Wolfe's *legmen, comes to the private detective with an Italian woman* Maria Maffei *who wants Wolfe to find* Carlo Maffei, *her brother who has disappeared. Wolfe sends* Archie Goodwin *to Maffei's Sullivan Street address to question a girl there who overheard a phone call to Maffei on the night he disappeared. Archie takes some items from the missing man's room, then questions the girl and brings her to Wolfe. Under fire, the girl gives Wolfe his first lead: the fact that on the Monday of his disappearance, he had given her a copy of the* Times *with a large section cut from the first page. Wolfe sends Archie for twenty copies of Monday's* Times *from which he clips several items from the front page, then flashes three separate front pages at the girl. She picks one. Wolfe asks if she'd ever seen a golf club in Maffei's room. The girl appears frightened, says that she hadn't. Archie takes her home. That night he looks over the clipped article. It reads:* Peter Oliver Barstow dead from stroke; President of Holland succumbs on links. *Early the next morning a* Mr. O'Grady *of Homicide arrives. Maffei has been found dead. Wolfe gives him everything taken from the room except a clipping from the classified section, advertising for a metal worker expert in both design and mechanism who intends returning to Europe for permanent residence. This ties in with Maffei since the girl had admitted taking boat stickers from Maffei on two separate occasions. Wolfe sends Archie to the office of the D.A. in Westchester to offer a $10,000 bet to Derwin, the D.A.'s chief assistant that if Barstow's body is disinterred and autopsied, they will find proof of poison. Further, just below the stomach, somewhere between one and three inches in from the skin, will be found a needle, pointing upward. Anderson, the D.A., is the only one with responsibility to exhume the body. Archie goes back to Wolfe, and does a little figuring: X, the murderer, hired Maffei to construct a golf club which, when striking the ball, would release a poisoned needle from its handle. Maffei did the job, probably agreeing to leave for Europe on the next boat. When he saw the* Times *item on Barstow's death, however, he figured this was a good opportunity for blackmailing X, which was why he was in turn murdered. Archie thinks again of the $10,000 bet and hopes that Wolfe is right.*

Copyright 1934 by Rex Stout. Reprinted through permission of Rinehart & Bros. Publishers

I WAS DUMB in a way though. All the time I was stewing I knew damn well Wolfe *was* right. It was that note I went to sleep on when I got home from the movie and found that Wolfe had already gone up to his room.

The next morning I was awake a little after seven, but I dawdled in bed, knowing that if I got up and dressed I would have to dawdle anyway, since there was no use bringing Anna Fiore until time for Wolfe to be down from the plant-rooms. I lay, yawning, looking at the picture of the woods with grass and flowers, and at the photograph of my father and mother, and then closed my eyes, not to nap for I was all slept out, but to see how many different noises from the street I could recognize. I was doing that when there was a knock on the door and in answer to my call Fritz came in.

"Good morning," I said. "I'll have grapefruit juice and just a tiny cup of chocolate."

Fritz smiled. He had a sweet sort of faraway smile. He could catch a joke but never tried to return it. "Good morning. There's a gentleman downstairs to see Mr. Wolfe."

I sat up. "What's his name?"

"He said Anderson. He had no card."

"What!" I swung myself to the edge of the bed. "Well well well well. He's not a gentleman, Fritz, he's a noovoh reesh. Mr. Wolfe is hoping that soon he'll be less reesh. Tell him — no, don't bother. I'll be right down."

I doused some cold water over my face, got on enough clothes for an emergency, and gave my hair a few swipes with a brush. Then I went down.

Anderson didn't get up from his chair when I entered the office. He was so sunburned that on the street it would have taken me a second glance to recognize him. He looked sleepy and sore and his hair hadn't been brushed any better than mine.

I said, "My name's Archie Goodwin. I don't suppose you remember me."

He kept his chair. "I suppose not, I'm sorry. I came to see Wolfe."

"Yes, sir. I'm afraid you'll have to wait a little. Mr. Wolfe isn't up yet."

"Not long I hope."

"I couldn't say. I'll see. If you'll excuse me."

I beat it to the hall and stood there at the foot of the stairs. I had to decide whether this was a case when Wolfe would want to break a rule. It was a quarter to eight. Finally I went on upstairs and down the hall to a point about ten feet from his door where there was a push-button in the wall. I pushed it, and right away heard his voice faintly:

"Well?"

"Turn off the switch. I'm coming in."

The little click and then: "Come."

You would never believe there was such a thing in the world as Wolfe in bed if you didn't see it. I had seen it often, but it was still a treat. On top was a black silk puffy cover which he always used, winter and summer. From the mound in the middle it sloped precipitously on all sides, so that if you wanted to see his face you had to stand well up front, and then you had to stoop to look under the canopy arrangement that he had sticking out from the head of the bed. It was also of black silk, and extended a foot beyond his chin and hung quite low on all three sides. Inside it on the white pillow his big fat face reposed like an image in a temple.

His hand came from beneath the cover to pull a cord that hung at his right, and the canopy folded back against the headboard. He blinked. I told him that Fletcher M. Anderson was downstairs and wanted to see him.

He cursed. I hated to hear him curse. It got on my nerves. The reason for that, he told me once, was that whereas in most cases cursing was merely a vocal explosion, with him it was a considered expression of a profound desire. He did it seldom. That morning he cursed completely. At the end he said, "Leave, get out, go."

I hated to stammer, too. "But — but — Anderson —"

"If Mr. Anderson wishes to see me he may do so at eleven o'clock. But that is unnecessary. What do I pay you for?"

"Very well, sir. Of course you're right. I break a rule and I get bawled out. But now that that's done with may I suggest that it would be good to see Anderson —"

"You may not suggest it."

"Ten thousand dollars?"

"No."

"In the name of heaven, sir, why not?"

"Confound it, you badger me?" Wolfe's head turned on the pillow, and he got a hand around to wiggle a finger. "Yes, you badger me. But it is a valuable quality at times and I won't cavil at it. Instead I'll answer your question. I shall not see Mr. Anderson for three reasons: first, being still in bed I am undressed and in an ugly temper. Second, you can do our business with him just as well. Third, I understand the technique of eccentricity; it would be futile for a man to labor at establishing a reputation for oddity if he were ready at the slightest provocation to revert to normal action. Go. At once."

I left the room and went downstairs to the office and told Anderson that if he wanted to wait he could see Mr. Wolfe at eleven o'clock.

Of course he couldn't believe his ears. As soon as he became able to credit the fact that the message was like that and that it was meant for him, he blew up. He seemed es-

pecially indignant that he had come straight to Wolfe's place from a sleeper at Grand Central Station, though I couldn't see why. I explained to him several times how it was, I told him it was eccentricity and there was no help for it. I also told him that I had been to White Plains the day before and was acquainted with the situation. That seemed to calm him a little and he began asking me questions. I fed it to him in little pieces, and had the fun of seeing the look on his face when I told him about Derwin calling Ben Cook in. When he had the whole story he sat back and rubbed his nose and looked over my head.

Finally he brought his look down to me. "This is a startling conclusion Wolfe has made. Isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. It is indeed."

"Then he must have some startling information."

I grinned. "Mr. Anderson, it is a pleasure to talk with you, but there's no use wasting time. As far as startling information is concerned, Wolfe and I are the same as two mummies in a museum until that grave is opened and Barstow is cut up. Not a chance."

"Well. That's too bad. I might offer Wolfe a fee as a special investigator — a sort of inquiry and report."

"A fee? That's like saying as long as a piece of string."

"Say, five hundred dollars."

I shook my head. "I'm afraid he's too busy. I'm busy too, I may have to run up to White Plains this morning."

"Oh." Anderson bit his lip and looked at me. "You know, Goodwin, I rarely go out of my way to be offensive, but doesn't it occur to you that this whole thing is fairly nasty? It might be better to say unethical."

I got sore at that. I looked back at him and said, "Look here, Mr. Anderson. You said you didn't remember me. I remember you. You haven't forgotten the Goldsmith case five years ago. It wouldn't have hurt you a bit to let people know what Wolfe handed you on that. But let that go, let's say you needed to keep it for yourself. We wouldn't have minded that so much. But how ethical was it for you to turn it around so that Wolfe got a nice black eye instead of what was really coming to him? You tend to your own ethics maybe."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"All right. But if I go to White Plains today somebody will know what I'm talking about. And whatever you get this time you'll pay for."

Anderson smiled and got up. "Don't bother, Goodwin. You won't be needed at White Plains today. On information that I have received I have decided definitely on the exhumation of Barstow's body. You will be here all day, or Wolfe? I may wish to get in touch later."

"Wolfe is always here, but you can't get him between nine and eleven or four and six."

"Well. Such an eccentric!"

"Yes, sir. Your hat's in the hall."

I went to the front room window and watched his taxi roll off. Then I returned to the office, to the telephone. I hesitated; but I knew Wolfe was right, and if he wasn't, a little publicity wouldn't make it any harder for us. So I called the *Gazette* office for Lon Cohen, and by luck he was in.

"Lon? Archie Goodwin. Here's something for you, but keep it so quiet you can hear a pin drop. This morning at White Plains, Anderson, the District Attorney, is going to get a court order for an exhumation and autopsy on Peter Oliver Barstow. He'll probably try to keep it mum, but I thought you might like to help him out. And listen. Some day, when the time comes, I'd be glad to tell you what it was that made Anderson so curious. Don't mention it."

I went upstairs and shaved and did my dressing over. By the time I had finished with that, and with breakfast and a little chat in the kitchen with Fritz about fish, it was nine-thirty. I went to the garage for the roadster and filled up with gas and oil, and headed south for Sullivan Street.

Since it was school hours it wasn't as noisy and dirty around there as it had been before, and it was different otherwise. I might have expected the decorations, but it hadn't occurred to me. There was a big black rosette with long black ribbons hanging on the door and above it was a large wreath of leaves and flowers. A few people were standing around, mostly across the street. A little distance off a cop stood on the sidewalk looking uninterested; but when my roadster pulled up some yards short of the door with the wreath on it I saw him cock an eye at me. I got out and went over to him to say hello.

I handed him a card. "I'm Archie Goodwin of Nero Wolfe's office. We were engaged by Maffei's sister to look for him the day before his body was found. I've come to see the landlady and check up a little."

"Yeah?" The cop stuck my card in a pocket. "I don't know a thing except that I'm standing here. Archie Goodwin? Pleased to meet you."

We shook hands and as I moved off I asked him to keep an eye on my car.

Mrs. Ricci didn't seem very glad to see me, but I could understand that easy enough. That dick O'Grady had probably raked her over for letting me take stuff from Maffei's room, of course without any right or reason, but that wouldn't deter O'Grady. I grinned when I saw the landlady's lips go shut, getting ready for the questions she thought I had come to ask. It's never any fun having a murdered man lying upstairs, even when he

was only a roomer. So I sympathized with her a little before I mentioned that I'd like to see Anna Fiore.

"She's busy."

"Sure. But this is important; my boss would like to see her. It would only take an hour or so, here, a couple of dollars —"

"No! For the love of God can't you let us alone in our house? Can't you let the poor woman bury her brother without cackling in her ears to drive her crazy? Who are you that —"

Of course she would have to pick me to blow up on. I saw it was hopeless to get any coöperation out of her, she wouldn't even listen to me, so I removed myself and went back to the front hall. The door to the dining-room was open, but the room was empty. After I had slipped in there I heard footsteps in the hall, and looking through the crack between the door and the jamb I saw Mrs. Ricci start upstairs. She went on up, and I could hear her continue the second flight. I stuck behind the door and waited, and luck came my way. Not more than ten minutes had passed before there were steps on the stairs, and using the crack again I saw Anna. I called her name, softly. She stopped and looked around. I called still softly, "In the dining-room." She came to the threshold and I moved around where she could see me.

"Hello, Anna. Mrs. Ricci told me to wait here till you came down."

"Oh. Mr. Archie."

"Sure. I came to take you for a ride. Mrs. Ricci was angry that I came for you, but you remember on Wednesday I gave her a dollar? Today I gave her two dollars, so she said all right. But hurry up; I told her we'd be back before noon."

I grabbed Anna's hand, but she held back. "In that car like the other day?"

"Sure. Come on."

"My jacket is upstairs and look at my dress."

"It's too warm for a jacket. Hurry; what if Mrs. Ricci changed her mind? We can buy you one . . . come on. . . ."

With my hand on her arm I worked her out of the dining-room and down the short hall to the entrance door, but I didn't want to look anxious outside; there was no telling how important that cop might think he was and any interruption might queer it. So I threw the door open and said, "Go on and get in, I'll tell Mrs. Ricci good-bye." I waited only a few seconds before I followed her; she was at the roadster opening the door. I went around to my side and climbed in, stepped on the starter, waved to the flatfoot and shot off down Sullivan Street in second with the engine roaring so that no yelling from an upstairs window could hurt Anna's ears.

She certainly was a scarecrow. Her dress was a sight. But I wasn't ashamed to have her beside me as, headed uptown again, I circled

through Washington Square and rolled into Fifth Avenue. Not a bit. The clock on the dash said twenty after ten.

Anna said, "Where are we going, Mr. Archie?"

I said, "You see how it is about your dress in this low seat? Nobody can see you anyway except your face and there's nothing wrong with that. What do you say we drive around Central Park? It's a beautiful morning."

"Oh yes."

I didn't say anything and she didn't either for about ten blocks and then she said again, "Oh yes."

She was certainly having a swell time. I went on up the Avenue and into the Park at Sixtieth. Up the west side to a Hundred and Tenth, across the Riverside Drive, up to Grant's Tomb where I circled around and turned downtown. I don't think she glanced at the trees or the grass or the river once; she kept looking at people in other cars. It was five minutes to eleven when I drew up in front of Wolfe's house.

Mrs. Ricci had already telephoned twice. Fritz had a funny look when he told me about it. I settled that at once by calling her up and giving her a piece about obstructing justice. I didn't know how much of it she heard with her yelling, but it seemed to work; we didn't hear another peep out of her before noon, when I left to take Anna home.

Wolfe came in while I was phoning Mrs. Ricci. I watched him stopping to tell the girl good morning on his way to the desk. He was elegant with women. He had some sort of a perverted idea about them that I've never caught the hang of but every time I had ever seen him with one he was elegant. I couldn't describe how he did it because I couldn't make it out myself; it was hard to see how that enormous lump of flesh and folds could ever be called elegant, but he certainly was. Even when he was bullying one of them, like the time he sweated the Diplomacy Club business out of Nyura Pronn. That was the best exhibition of squeezing a sponge dry I've ever seen.

He started softly with Anna Fiore. After he had flipped through the mail, he turned and looked at her a minute before he said, "We no longer need to indulge in any conjectures as to the whereabouts of your friend Carlo Maffei. Accept my condolences. You have viewed the body?"

"Yes, sir."

"It is a pity, a real pity, for he did not seek violence; he got in its path by misadventure. It is curious on how slender a thread the destiny of a man may hang; for example, that of the murderer of Carlo Maffei may hang on this, Miss Fiore: when and under what circumstances did you see a golf club in Maffei's room?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes. It will be easy to tell us

now. Probably my question the other day recalled the occasion to your mind."

"Yes, sir."

"It did?"

She opened her mouth but said nothing. I was watching her, and she looked odd to me. Wolfe asked her again, "It did?"

She was silent. I couldn't see that she was a bit nervous or frightened, she was just silent.

"When I asked you about this the other day, Miss Fiore, you seemed a little upset. I was sorry for that. Would you tell me why you were upset?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was it perhaps your memory of something unpleasant that happened the day you saw the golf club?"

Silence again. I saw that something was wrong. Wolfe hadn't asked the last question as if it meant anything. I knew the shades of the tones of his voice, and I knew he wasn't interested; at least, not in that question. Something had him off on another trail. All at once he shot another question at her in another tone:

"When did you decide to say *Yes, sir*, to anything I might ask you?"

No answer; but without waiting Wolfe went on: "Miss Fiore, I would like to make you understand this. My last question had nothing whatever to do with a golf club or with Carlo Maffei. Don't you see that? So if you have decided to reply nothing but *Yes, sir*, to anything I may ask about Carlo Maffei that will be all right. You have an absolute right to do that because that is what you decided to do. But if I ask you about other things you have no right to say *Yes, sir*, then, because that is not what you decided to do. About other things you should talk just as anyone would. So, when you decided to say nothing but *Yes, sir*, to me, was it on account of anything that Carlo Maffei had done?"

Anna was looking hard at him, right at his eye. It was clear that she wasn't suspecting him or fighting against him, she was merely trying to understand him. She looked and he looked back. After a minute of that she said:

"No, sir."

"Ah! Good. It was not on account of anything he had done. Then it had nothing to do with him, so it is all right for you to tell me anything about it that I may ask. You see that of course. If you have decided to tell me nothing of Carlo Maffei I won't ask you. But this other business. Did you decide to say *Yes, sir*, to Mr. O'Grady, the man that came and asked you questions yesterday morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you do that?"

She frowned, but said, "Because something happened."

"Good. What happened?"

She shook her head.

"Come, Miss Fiore." Wolfe was quiet. "There is no reason on earth why you shouldn't tell me."

She turned her head to look at me, and then at him. After a moment she said, "I'll tell Mr. Archie."

"Good. Tell Mr. Archie."

She spoke to me. "I got a letter."

Wolfe shot a glance at me and I took it up. "You got a letter yesterday?"

She nodded. "Yesterday morning."

"Who was it from?"

"I don't know. There was no name, it was on a typewriter, and on the envelope it said only Anna and the address, not the rest of my name. Mrs. Ricci gets the mail from the box and she brought it to me but I didn't want to open it where she was because I never get a letter. I went downstairs where I sleep and opened it."

"What did it say?"

She looked at me a moment without replying, and then suddenly she smiled, a funny smile that made me feel queer so that it wasn't easy to look at her. But I kept my eyes on hers. Then she said, "I'll show you what was in it, Mr. Archie," and reached down and pulled her skirt up above her knee, shoved her hand down inside of her stocking, and brought it out again with something in it. I stared as she unrolled five twenty-dollar bills and spread them out for me to see.

"You mean that was in the letter?"

She nodded. "One hundred dollars."

"So I see. But there was something typewritten."

"Yes. It said that if I would never tell anyone anything about Mr. Maffei or anything he ever did I could keep the money. But if I would not do that, if I told about him, I would have to burn it. I burned the letter, but I will not burn the money. I will keep it."

"You burned the letter?"

"Yes."

"And the envelope?"

"Yes."

"And you think you won't tell anyone about Mr. Maffei or about that golf club?"

"I never will."

I looked at her. Wolfe's chin was on his chest, but he was looking at her too. I got up from my chair. "Well, of all the goddamn fairy stories —"

"Archie! Apologize."

"But good heavens —"

"Apologize."

I turned to the girl. "I apologize for swearing, but when I think of all the gas I burned up riding you around the park . . ." I sat down.

Wolfe said, "Miss Fiore, did you notice the postmark? The little round thing on the envelope that tells where it was mailed?"

"No, sir."

"Of course not. By the way, that money did not belong to the man who sent it to you. He took it from Carlo Maffei's pocket."

"I will keep it, sir."

"No doubt you will. You may not be aware that if the police knew of this they would take it from you ruthlessly. But do not be alarmed; your confidence in Mr. Archie is not misplaced." He turned to me. "Grace and charm are always admirable qualities, and sometimes useful. Take Miss Fiore home."

I protested. "But why not —"

"No. Get her to burn those bills by replacing them from your expense book? No. She would not do it; but even if she would, I would not see money burned to save beauty herself from any grave that might be dug for her. The destruction of money is the only authentic sacrilege left us to abhor. Possibly you don't realize what that hundred dollars means to Miss Fiore; to her it represents the unimaginable reward for a desperate and heroic act. Now that she has it safely back in its crypt, take her home." He started to get himself out of his chair. "Good day, Miss Fiore. I have paid you a rare compliment; I have assumed that you mean what you say. Good morning."

I was at the door telling her to come on.

Going back downtown I let her alone. I was plenty sore, after kidnapping her and driving her around in style for nearly an hour to have her go moron on us, but there was no use wasting breath on her. At Sullivan Street I just dumped her out on the sidewalk with a good deal of satisfaction, thinking that Wolfe had been elegant enough for both of us.

She stood there. As I pulled the gear shift lever to go on she said, "Thank you, Mr. Archie."

She was being elegant! She had caught it from Wolfe. I said, "You're not welcome, Anna, but good-bye and no hard feelings," and rolled off.

II

It was during the half-hour that I was gone taking Anna Fiore home that Wolfe had a relapse. It was a bad one, and it lasted three days. When I got back to Thirty-fifth Street he was sitting in the kitchen, by the little table where I always ate breakfast, drinking beer with three bottles already gone, arguing with Fritz whether chives should be used in tomato tarts. I stood and listened a few minutes without saying anything, then I went upstairs to my room and got a bottle of rye from the closet and took a drink.

I had never really understood Wolfe's relapses. Sometimes it seemed plain that it was just ordinary discouragement and funk, like the time the taxi-driver ran out on us in the Pine Street case, but other times there was no accounting for it at all. Everything would be sailing along and it would look to me as if we were about ready to wrap up the package and

deliver it C. O. D., when for no reason at all he would lost interest. He was out and that was all there was to it. Nothing that I could say made the slightest dent on him. It might last anywhere from one afternoon up to a couple of weeks, or it was even possible that he was out for good and wouldn't come back until something new turned up. While it lasted he acted one of two different ways: either he went to bed and stayed there, living on bread and onion soup, refusing to see anyone but me and forbidding me to mention anything I had on my mind; or he sat in the kitchen telling Fritz how to cook things and then eating them on my little table. He ate a whole half a sheep that way in two days once, different parts of it cooked in twenty different ways. At such times I usually had my tongue hanging out from running all over town from the Battery to Bronx Park, trying to find some herb or root or maybe cordial that they needed in the dish they were going to do next. The only time I ever quit Wolfe was when he sent me to a Brooklyn dock where a tramp steamer from China was tied up, to try to buy some baddenroot from the captain. The captain must have had a cargo of opium or something to make him suspicious; anyway he took it for granted that I was looking for trouble and filled my order by having half a dozen skinny savages wrap things around my skull. I quit the next afternoon, phoning from the hospital, but a day later Wolfe came and took me home, and I was so astonished that he actually came himself that I forgot I had quit. That finished that relapse, too.

This day I knew it was a relapse as soon as I saw him sitting in the kitchen arguing with Fritz, and I was so disgusted that after I had gone upstairs and had a couple of drinks I came down again and went out. I started walking, but after a few blocks the appetite from the drinks was quite active and I stopped at a restaurant for a meal. No restaurant meal was much after seven years of Fritz's every-day cooking, but I wouldn't go home to eat; in the first place I was disgusted and in the second place those relapse menus couldn't be depended on — sometimes it was a feast for an epicure, sometimes it was a dainty little taste good for eighty cents in Schrafft's, and sometimes it was just a mess.

But after the meal I felt better and I walked back to Thirty-fifth Street and told Wolfe what Anderson had said that morning and added that it looked to me as if there would be something doing before the full moon came.

Wolfe was watching Fritz stir something in a pan. He looked at me as if he was trying to remember where he had seen me before. He said, "Don't ever mention that shyster's name to me again."

I said, hoping to get him sore, "This morning I phoned Lon Cohen at the *Gazette* and told him. I knew you'd want plenty of publicity."

He didn't hear me. He said to Fritz, "Have boiling water ready in case it should disunite."

I went upstairs to tell Horstmann he'd have to nurse his babies alone that afternoon and maybe for a week. He would be miserable. It was always funny how he pretended to be annoyed when Wolfe was around but if anything happened to keep Wolfe from showing up on the dot at nine or four he was so worried and anxious you might have thought mealy bugs were after him. So I went upstairs to make him miserable.

That was two o'clock Friday afternoon, and the first sane look I got from Wolfe was eleven Monday morning, sixty-nine hours later.

In between things happened a little. First was the telephone call from Lon Cohen Friday around four. I'd been expecting it. He said they had dug Barstow up and done the autopsy but wouldn't make any announcement. It wasn't his story any more; others had got wind of it and were hanging around the coroner's office.

A little after six the second phone call came. This time it was Anderson. I grinned when I heard his voice and glanced at my wrist; I could see him fuming around waiting for six o'clock. He said he wanted to talk to Wolfe.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wolfe is busy. This is Goodwin."

He said he wanted Wolfe to come to White Plains. I laughed at him. He rang off. I didn't like it, he struck me as a bad guy. After thinking it over a little I called up Henry H. Barber at his apartment and got all the dope on things like accessories and arrests of material witnesses. Then I went to the kitchen and told Wolfe about the two phone calls. He wiggled a spoon at me.

"Archie. This Anderson is a disease. Cleanse the telephone. Did I forbid mention of his name?"

I said, "I'm sorry, I should have known better. You know what I think, sir. A nut is always a nut even when it's you. I want to talk to Fritz."

Wolfe wasn't listening. I told Fritz that for dinner I would come and get sandwiches and take them to the office, and then I told him that when the buzzer rang, until further notice, he was not to go to the door, I would attend to it. Under no circumstances was he to open the door.

I knew it was probably uncalled-for precaution, but I was taking no chances on anyone busting in there with Wolfe in one of his Bloomingdale moods. I was glad he hadn't tried to send me for anything and I hoped he wouldn't, for I wouldn't have gone. If it was a washout, all right, but I wasn't going to let them make ninnies of us if I could

help it. Nothing happened that night. The next morning I stayed out of Wolfe's way, mostly in the front room, opening the door to a gas man and an expressman, and once to a slick youth that wanted to get helped through college. I helped him as far as the bottom of the stoop. It was around eleven when I obeyed the buzzer by opening the door again and found a big husky standing against it, coming in with it, his foot sliding along. I gave him a good solid stiff-arm and pushed him back, and went on out, shutting the door behind me.

I said, "Good morning. Who invited you?"

He said, "It wasn't you anyhow. I want to see Nero Wolfe."

"You can't. He's sick. What do you want?"

He smiled, being smooth, and handed me a card. I looked at it.

"Sure. From Anderson's office. His right-hand man? What do you want?"

"You know what I want," he smiled. "Let's go in and talk it over."

I didn't see any sense in trying to be coy. Anyway I had no idea when Wolfe might kick out of it, and that made me sick. So I covered it all in as few words as possible. I told him that Wolfe didn't know one thing that they didn't know, at least nothing that applied to Barstow, and that what he did know came to him in a dream. I told him that if they wanted Wolfe on the case at a price to say so and name the price and he would take it or leave it. I told him that if they wanted to try any funny warrants they would be surprised how funny they'd turn out to be before Wolfe got through with them. Then I told him that I could see that he weighed twenty pounds more than I did and that therefore I wouldn't attempt to go back in the house until he had departed, and that I would appreciate it if he would get a move on because I was reading an interesting book. He inserted a few remarks as I went along, but when I finished all he said was:

"Tell Wolfe he can't get away with it."

"Sure. Any other message?"

"Just go to hell for you."

I grinned, and stood on the stoop watching him as he walked off headed east. I had never heard of him before, but I didn't know Westchester very well. The name on the card was H. R. Corbett. I went back to the front room and sat and smoked cigarettes.

After lunch, some time around four, I heard a newsy out in the street calling an extra. I went out and called him and bought one. There it was taking up half of the front page: BARSTOW POISONED — DART FOUND IN BODY. I read it through. If ever I had a pain in the neck it was then. Of course Wolfe and I weren't mentioned; I hadn't expected that;

but to think of what that piece might have meant to us! I kicked myself for bungling with Derwin, and again with Anderson, for I was sure it could have been handled somehow to let us in, though it was hard to see how. And I kicked Wolfe for his damn relapse. At least I wanted to. I read it again. It wasn't a dart at all, it was a short steel needle, just as Wolfe had said, and it had been found below the stomach. Sore as I was at Wolfe, I handed it to him. There was his picture.

I went to the kitchen and laid the paper on the table in front of Wolfe without a word, and went out again. He called after me, "Archie! Get the car, here's a list for you."

I pretended I didn't hear. Later Fritz went.

Next day the Sunday papers were full of it. They had sent their packs running around sniffing all over Westchester County, but they hadn't found a thing. I read all the articles through, and I learned a lot of details about the Green Meadow Club, the Barstow family, the Kimballs who had been in the foursome, the doctor who had pulled a boner, and a lot besides, but nobody really knew any more than Wolfe had known Wednesday evening when he had asked Anna Fiore if she had ever seen a golf club in Carlo Maffei's room. Not as much, for there was no accepted theory as to how the needle got in Barstow's belly. All the papers had pieces by experts on poisons and what they do to you.

Sunday evening I went to a movie, telling Fritz to open the door to no one. Not that I expected anything; it looked as if Anderson was playing his own hand. Possibly, through motive or discoveries he had made, he was really lining it up. I would have got drunk that evening if it hadn't been Sunday. When I got back from the movie Wolfe had gone up to his room, but Fritz was still in the kitchen washing up. I fried a piece of ham to make myself a sandwich and poured a glass of milk, for I hadn't had much dinner. I noticed that the *Times* I had put there in the morning for Wolfe was still on top of the refrigerator just as I had left it. It was ten to one he hadn't looked at it.

I read in my room until after midnight and then had trouble going to sleep on account of my mind working. But apparently there was no trouble about it after I once got started, for when I pried my eyes open in the morning enough to glance at the clock on the stand it was after nine. I was sitting on the edge of the bed yawning when I heard a noise overhead that woke me up good. Either that was two pairs of footsteps and I knew both of them or I was still dreaming. I went out in the hall and listened and then ran downstairs. Fritz was in the kitchen drinking coffee.

"Is that Mr. Wolfe up with Horstmann?"

"And how." That was the only slang Fritz ever used and he always welcomed a chance to get it in. He smiled at me, glad to see me excited and happy. "Now I will just get a leg of lamb and rub garlic on it."

"Rub poison ivy on it if you want to." I went back up to dress.

The relapse was over! I was excited all right. I shaved extra clean and whistled in the bathtub. With Wolfe normal again anything might happen. When I got back down to the kitchen a dish of figs and a fat omelet were ready for me, and the newspaper was propped up against the coffeepot. I started on the headlines and the figs at the same time, but halfway through a fig I stopped chewing. I raced down the paragraphs, swallowing the mouthful whole to get it out of the way. It was plain, the paper stated it as a fact. Although no confirmation was needed, I turned the pages over, running my eyes up and down and across. It was on page eight towards the bottom, a neat little ad in a neat little box:

I WILL PAY FIFTY THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD TO ANY PERSON OR PERSONS WHO WILL FURNISH INFORMATION RESULTING IN THE DISCOVERY AND RIGHTEOUS PUNISHMENT OF THE MURDERER OF MY HUSBAND PETER OLIVER BARSTOW

ELLEN BARSTOW

I read it through three times and then tossed the paper away and got calm. I finished the fruit and omelet, with three pieces of toast and three cups of coffee. Fifty grand, with the Wolfe bank balance sagging like a clothesline under a wet horse blanket; and not only that, but a chance of keeping our places on the platform in the biggest show of the season. I was calm and cool, but it was only twenty minutes after ten. I went to the office and opened the safe and dusted around and waited.

When Wolfe came down at eleven he looked fresh but not noticeably good-humored. He only nodded for good morning and didn't seem to care much whether I was there or not as he got himself into his chair and started looking through the mail. I just waited, thinking I would show him that other people could be as hard-boiled as he was, but when he began checking off the monthly bill from Harvey's I popped at him:

"I hope you had a nice week-end, sir."

He didn't look at me, but I saw his cheeks folding. "Thank you, Archie. It was delightful; but on awakening this morning I felt so completely water-logged that with only myself to consider I would have remained in bed to await disintegration. Names battered at me: Archie Goodwin, Fritz Brenner, Theodore Horstmann; responsibilities; and I arose to

resume my burden. Not that I complain; but my share can be done only by me I believe."

"Excuse me, sir, but you're a damn liar, what you did was look at the paper."

He checked off items on the bill. "You can't rile me, Archie, not today. Paper? I have looked at nothing this morning except life, and that not through a newspaper."

"Then you don't know that Mrs. Barstow has offered fifty thousand dollars for her husband's murderer?"

The pencil stopped checking; he didn't look at me, but the pencil was motionless in his fingers for seconds. Then he placed the bill under a paperweight, laid the pencil beside it, and lifted his head.

"Show it to me."

I exhibited the ad and the first page article. Of the ad he read each word; the article he glanced through.

"Indeed," he said. "Indeed. Mr. Anderson does not need the money, even granting the possibility of his earning it, and only a moment ago I was speaking of responsibilities. Archie, do you know what I thought in bed this morning? I thought how horrible and how amusing it would be to send Theodore away and let all those living and breathing plants, all that arrogant and pampered loveliness, thirst, gasp, wither away."

"Good God."

"Yes. Just an early morning fantasy; I haven't the will for such a gesture. I would be more likely to offer them at auction — should I decide to withdraw from responsibilities — and take passage for Egypt. You know of course that I own a house in Egypt which I have never seen. The man who gave it to me, a little more than ten years ago — yes, Fritz, what is it?"

Fritz was a little awry, having put on his jacket hurriedly to go to the door.

"A lady to see you, sir."

"Her name?"

"She had no card, sir."

Wolfe nodded, and Fritz went out. In a moment he was back on the threshold, bowing in a young woman. I was on my feet. She started towards me, and I inclined my head in Wolfe's direction. She looked at him, stopped, and said:

"Mr. Nero Wolfe? My name is Sarah Barstow."

"Be seated," Wolfe said. "You must pardon me; for engineering reasons I arise only for emergencies."

"This is an emergency," she said.

III

From the newspapers I was pretty well up on Sarah Barstow. She was twenty-five, popular, a graduate of Smith, and prominent both in university society at Holland and in various groups in summer Westchester. Of course beautiful, according to the papers. I thought to myself that this time that detail was accurate, as she arranged herself in a chair in front of Wolfe and sat with her eyes on him. She wore a tan linen dress with a coat to match and a

little black hat on sideways. Her gloves showed that she was driving. Her face was a little small but everything on it was in place and well arranged; her eyes were too bright in the pupils and too heavy around the edges from tiredness, and from crying perhaps, and her skin was pale, but health and pleasantness showed through that. Her voice was low and had sense in it. I liked her.

She started to explain herself, but Wolfe wiggled a finger at her. "It is unnecessary, and possibly painful to you, Miss Barstow, I know. You are the only daughter of Peter Oliver Barstow. All you need tell is why you have come to me."

"Yes." She hesitated. "Of course you would know, Mr. Wolfe. It is a little difficult — perhaps I wanted a preamble." She had a try at a smile. "I am going to ask you a favor, I don't know how much of a favor it will be."

"I can tell you that."

"Of course. First I must ask you, do you know that my mother had an advertisement in the paper this morning?"

Wolfe nodded. "I have read it."

"Well, Mr. Wolfe, I — that is, we, the family — must ask you to disregard that advertisement."

Wolfe breathed and let his chin down. "An extraordinary request, Miss Barstow. Am I supposed to be as extraordinary in granting it, or do I get reasons?"

"There are reasons of course." She hesitated. "It is not a family secret, it is known that my mother is — in some degree and on various occasions — irresponsible." Her eyes were earnest on him. "You must not think there is anything ugly about this or that it has anything to do with money. There is plenty of money and my brother and I are not niggardly. Nor must you think that my mother is not a competent person — certainly not in the legal sense. But for years there have been times when she needed our attention and love, and this — this terrible thing has come in the middle of one of them. She is not normally vengeful, but that advertisement — my brother calls it a demand for blood. Our close friends will of course understand, but there is the world, and my father — my father's world was a wide one — we are glad if they help us mourn for him but we would not want them — Father would not want them — to watch us urging on the bloodhounds —"

She gave a little gasp and stopped, and glanced at me and back at Wolfe. He said, "Yes, Miss Barstow, you are calling me a bloodhound. I am not offended. Go on."

"I'm sorry. I'm a tactless fool. It would have been better if Dr. Bradford had come."

"Was Dr. Bradford considering the enterprise?"

"Yes. That is, he thought it should be done."

"And your brother?"

"Well . . . yes. My brother

greatly regrets it, the advertisement I mean. He did not fully approve of my coming to see you. He thought it would be . . . fruitless."

"On the theory that it is difficult to call off a bloodhound. Probably he understands dogs. Have you finished, Miss Barstow? I mean, have you any further reasons to advance?"

She shook her head. "Surely, Mr. Wolfe, those are sufficient."

"Then as I understand it, your desire is that no effort be made to discover and punish the person who murdered your father?"

She stared at him. "Why . . . no, I didn't say that."

"The favor you ask of me is that I refrain from such an effort?"

Her lips closed. She opened them enough to say, "I see. You are putting it as badly as possible."

"Not at all. Clearly, not badly. Understandably, your mind is confused; mine is lucid. Your position as you have so far expressed it is simply not intelligent. You may make any one of several requests of me, but you may not ask them all at once, for they are mutually exclusive. You may, for instance, tell me that while you are willing that I should discover the murderer, you request me not to expect to be paid for it as your mother has offered. Is that your request?"

"It is not. You know it is not."

"Good. You may request me to make no effort to find the murderer, so that your mother's demand for blood may be nullified. Is that it?"

"I have said it is not."

"Or you may tell me that I may find the murderer if I can, and collect the reward if I choose to take advantage of the legal obligation, but that the family disapproves of the offer of reward on moral grounds. Is that it?"

"Yes." Her lip trembled a little, but in a moment she pulled it up firm. Then suddenly she stood up and shot at him, "No! I'm sorry I came here. Professor Gottlieb was wrong; you may be clever . . . good day, Mr. Wolfe."

"Good day, Miss Barstow." Wolfe was motionless. "The engineering considerations keep me in my chair."

She was going. But halfway to the door she faltered, stood a moment, and turned. "You *are* a bloodhound. You are. You are heartless."

"Quite likely." Wolfe crooked a finger. "Come back to your chair. Come, do; your errand is too important to let a momentary resentment ruin it. That's better; self-control is an admirable quality. Now, Miss Barstow, we can do one of two things: either I can flatly but gracefully refuse your original request as you made it and we can part on fairly bad terms; or you can answer a few questions I would like to ask and we can then decide what's to be done. Which shall it be?"

She was groggy, but game. She was back in her chair and had a wary eye on him. "I have answered many questions in the past two days."

"I don't doubt it. I can imagine their tenor and their stupidity. I shall not waste your time or insult your intelligence. How did you learn that I knew anything of this business?"

She seemed surprised. "How did I learn it? Why, you are responsible for it. That is, you discovered it. Everyone knows it. It was in the paper — not New York, the White Plains paper."

I had a grin at that. Derwin would phone Ben Cook to come and assist me to the Station, would he?

Wolfe nodded. "Have you asked the favor of Mr. Anderson that you have asked of me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

She hesitated. "Well . . . it didn't seem necessary. It didn't seem . . . I don't know how to express it."

"Use your wits, Miss Barstow. Was it because it appeared unlikely that he would do any discovering worthy the name?"

She was holding herself tight. Her hands — damn good hands, with strong fingers and honest knuckles — were little fists in her lap. "No!" she said.

"Very well. But what made you think it likely, at least possible, that my discovering might be more to the point?"

She began, "I didn't think —" But he stopped her:

"Come, control yourself. It is an honest plain question. You did think me more competent at discovery than Mr. Anderson, did you not? Was it because I had made the original discovery?"

"Yes."

"That is, because I had somehow known that your father was killed by a poisoned needle propelled from the handle of a golf club?"

"I . . . don't . . . know. I don't know, Mr. Wolfe."

"Courage. This will soon be over. Curiosity alone prompts the next question. What gave you the strange idea that I was so rare a person as to respond favorably to the idiotic request you meant to make of me?"

"I didn't know. I didn't have that idea really. But I was ready to try, and I had heard a professor at the university, Gottlieb, the psychologist, mention your name — he had written a book called *Modern Crime Detection* —"

"Yes. A book that an intelligent criminal should send as a gift to every detective he knows."

"Perhaps. His opinion of you is more complimentary. When I telephoned Professor Gottlieb he said that you were not susceptible of analysis because you had intuition from the devil, and that you were a sensitive artist as well as a man of probity. That sounded — well, I decided to come to see you. Mr. Wolfe, I beg you . . . I beg of you . . ."

I was sure she was going to cry and I didn't want her to. But Wolfe brusquely brought her up:

"That's all, Miss Barstow. That is

all I need to know. Now I shall ask a favor of you: will you permit Mr. Goodwin to take you upstairs and show you my plants?"

She stared; he went on, "No subterfuge is intended. I merely wish to be alone with the devil. Half an hour perhaps; for that and for a telephone call. When you return I shall have a proposal for you." He turned to me. "Fritz will call you."

She got up and came with me without a word. I thought that was pretty good, for she was shaky and suspicious all over. Instead of asking her to walk up two flights of stairs I took her down the hall and used Wolfe's elevator. As we got out on the top floor she stopped me by catching my arm.

"Mr. Goodwin. Why did Mr. Wolfe send me up here?"

I shook my head. "No good, Miss Barstow. Even if I knew I wouldn't tell you, and since I don't know we might as well look at the flowers." As I opened the door to the passage Horstmann appeared from the potting-room. "All right, Horstmann. May we look around a little?" He nodded and trotted back.

I never went in the plant-rooms without catching my breath. It was like other things I've noticed, for instance no matter how often you may have seen Furillo leap in the air and one-handed spear a hot liner like one streak of lightning stopping another one, when you see it again your heart stops. It was that way in the plant-rooms.

Wolfe used concrete benches and angle-iron staging, with a spraying system Horstmann had invented for humidity. There were three main rooms, one for Cattleyas, Laelias and hybrids, one for Odontoglossums, Oncidiums and Miltonia hybrids, and the tropical room. Then there was the potting-room, Horstmann's den, and a little corner room for propagation. Supplies — pots, sand, sphagnum, leafmold, loam, osmundine, charcoal, crock — were kept in an unheated and unglazed room in the rear alongside the shaft where the outside elevator came up.

Since it was June the lath screens were on, and the slices of shade and sunshine made patterns everywhere — on the broad leaves, the blossoms, the narrow walks, the ten thousand pots. I liked it that way, it seemed gay.

It was a lesson to watch the flowers get Miss Barstow. Of course when she went in she felt about as much like looking at flowers as I felt like disregarding her mother's ad, and down the first rows of Cattleyas she tried to be polite enough to pretend there was something there to see. The first one that really brought her up was a small sidebench, only twenty or so, of Laeliocattleya Lustre. I was pleased because it was one of my favorites. I stopped behind her.

"Astonishing," she said. "I've never seen one like that. The colors . . . amazing."

"Yes. It's a bi-generic hybrid;

they don't come in nature like that."

She got interested. In the next walk were some Brassocattlaelias Truffautianas and I cut off a couple and handed them to her. I told her a little about hybridization and seedlings and so on, but maybe she didn't hear me. Then, in the next room, I had a disappointment. She liked the Odontoglossums better than the Cattleyas and hybrids! I suspected it was because they were more expensive and difficult, but it turned out that she hadn't known that. No accounting for tastes, I thought. And best of all, even after we had been through the tropical room, she liked a little thing I had never looked at twice, a Miltonia blueanaeximina. She talked about its delicacy and form. I nodded and began to lose interest, and anyway I was wondering what Wolfe was up to. Then at last Fritz appeared. He came down the walk clear up to us and bent himself at the middle and said that Mr. Wolfe expected us. I grinned and would have liked to dig him in the ribs as I went by, but I knew he'd never forgive me.

Wolfe was still in his chair, and there was no indication that he had been out of it. He nodded at Miss Barstow's chair and at mine, and waited till we were arranged to say:

"You liked the flowers?"

"They are wonderful." She had a new eye on him, I could see that. "They are too much beauty."

Wolfe nodded. "At first, yes. But a long intimacy frees you of that illusion, and it also acquaints you with their scantiness of character. The effect they have produced on you is only their bluff. There is not such a thing as too much beauty."

"Perhaps." She had lost interest in the orchids. "Yes, perhaps."

"At any rate, they passed your time. And, of course, you would like to know how I passed mine. First I telephoned my bank and asked them to procure immediately a report on the financial standing of Ellen Barstow, your mother, and on the details of the will of Peter Oliver Barstow, your father. I then telephoned Dr. Bradford and endeavored to persuade him to call on me this afternoon or evening, but he will be otherwise engaged. I then sat and waited. Five minutes ago my bank telephoned me the report I had requested. I sent Fritz for you. Those were my activities."

She was getting worked up again. Her lips were getting tight. Apparently she didn't intend to open them.

He went on. "I said I would have a proposal for you. Here it is. Your notebook, Archie. Verbatim, please. I shall use my best efforts to find the murderer of Peter Oliver Barstow. I shall disclose the result of my efforts to you, Sarah Barstow, and if you interpose no objection, I shall also disclose them to the proper public authorities, and at the proper time shall expect a check for the sum your mother has offered as a re-

ward. But if my inquiries lead to the conclusion that the murderer is actually the person you fear it is, whom you are now endeavoring to shield from justice, there will be no further disclosure. Mr. Goodwin and I will know; no one else. — Just a moment! This is a speech, Miss Barstow; please hear all of it. Two more points. You must understand that I can make this proposal with propriety. I am not a public servant, I am not even a member of the bar, and I have sworn to uphold no law. The dangerous position of an accessory after the fact does not impress me. Then: if your fears prove to be justified, and I withhold disclosure, what of the reward? I find I am too sentimental and romantic to make it part of this proposal that under those circumstances the reward shall be paid. The word blackmail actually strikes me as unpleasant. But though I am handicapped by romance and sentiment, at least I have not pride further to hamper me, and, if you should choose to present a gift, it would be accepted. — Read it aloud, Archie, to make sure it is understood."

Miss Barstow's voice was first: "But this — it's absurd! It —"

Wolfe wiggled a finger at her. "Don't. Please. You would deny that you came here with that nonsense to shield someone? Miss Barstow! Really now. Let us keep this on a decent level of intelligence. Read it, Archie."

I read it through from my notes. When I had finished Wolfe said, "I advise you to take it, Miss Barstow. I shall proceed with my inquiry in any event, and if the result is what you fear it would be convenient for you to have the protection I offer. The offer, by the way, is purely selfish. With this agreement I shall expect your interest and cooperation, since it would be well for you, no matter what the outcome, to get it over with as speedily as possible; without it I shall expect considerable obstruction. I am no altruist or *bon enfant*. I am merely a man who would like to make some money. You said there was too much beauty upstairs; no, but there is too much expense. Have you any idea what it costs to grow orchids like that?"

Sarah Barstow only stared at him.

"Come," Wolfe said. "There will of course be no signing. This is what is humorously called a gentleman's agreement. The first step in fulfilling it will be for Mr. Goodwin to call at your home tomorrow morning — it can wait until then — to talk, with your permission, with yourself and your brother and mother and whosoever —"

"No!" she exploded. Then she shut up.

"I'm sorry, but it is essential. Mr. Goodwin is a man of discretion, common decency, and immeasurable valor. It really is essential. — I'll tell you what, Miss Barstow." He put his hands on the edge of the desk and shoved his chair back, moved his hands to the arms of the chair and

got himself to his feet, and stood in front of her. "You go on home, or about your errands, whatever they may be. People often find it difficult to think in my presence; I do not leave enough space. I know you are suffering, your emotions are tormenting you with their unbearable clamor, but you must free your mind to do its work. Go. Buy hats or keep a rendezvous, or attend to your mother, whatever you may have in mind. Telephone me this evening between six and seven and tell me what time Mr. Goodwin may arrive in the morning, or else tell me that he is not to come and we are enemies. Go."

She stood up. "Well . . . I don't know . . . my God, I don't know . . ."

"Please! That is not your mind speaking, it's the foam of churned feelings and has no meaning. I do not wish to be your enemy."

She was right in front of him, facing him, with her chin tilted up so that her eyes could be on his. "I believe you," she said. "I really believe you don't."

"Indeed, I do not. Good day, Miss Barstow."

"Good day, Mr. Wolfe."

I took her to the front door and let her out. I thought she might have handed me a good day too, but she didn't. She didn't say anything. As she went out I saw her car at the curb, a dark blue coupe.

Back in the office, Wolfe was in his chair again. I stood on the other side of the desk looking at him.

"Well," I said, "what do you know about that?"

His cheeks folded. "I know I'm hungry, Archie. It is pleasant to have an appetite again. I've had none for weeks."

Naturally I was indignant; I stared at him. "You can say that, after Friday and Saturday and Sunday . . ."

"But no appetite. A desperate search for one. Now I'm hungry. Lunch will be in twenty minutes. Meantime, I have learned that there is a person attached to a golf club called a professional. Find out who fills that post at the Green Meadow Club; see if we have any grateful client who might introduce us on the telephone; invite the professional, urgently, to dine with us this evening. There is a goose left from Saturday. After lunch you will pay a visit to the office of Dr. Nathaniel Bradford, and stop at the library for some books I need."

"Yes, sir. Who do you think Miss Barstow —"

"Not now, Archie. I would prefer just to sit here quietly and be hungry. After lunch."

IV

At ten o'clock Tuesday morning, June 13, I drove the roadster through the entrance gate of the Barstow place, after it had been opened for me by a state trooper who was there on guard. Another husky was with him, a private watchman of the Barstows', and I had to furnish

plenty of proof that I was the Archie Goodwin Sarah Barstow was expecting. It looked likely that many a newspaper man had been sent to climb a tree around there in the past three days.

The house was at the low point of a saddle between two hills about seven miles northeast of Pleasantville. It was built of stone, quite large — well over twenty rooms, I should say — and there were a lot of outbuildings. After going through about three hundred yards of trees and shrubbery the drive circled around the edge of an immense sloping lawn and entered under the shelter of a roof with two steps up to a flagged terrace. This was really the side of the house; the front was around the corner looking over the lawn and down the hill. There were gardens ahead as you entered, and more gardens at the other edge of the lawn, with boulders and a pool. As I eased the roadster along taking it in I thought to myself that fifty grand was nothing. I had on a dark blue suit, with a blue shirt and a tan tie, and of course my panama, which I had had cleaned right after Decoration Day.

Sarah Barstow was expecting me at ten, and I was right on the dot. I parked the roadster in a graveled space the other side of the entrance, and pushed the button at the door on the terrace. It was standing open, but double screen doors kept me from seeing much inside. Soon there were footsteps, and one of the screens came out at me, and with it a tall skinny guy in a black suit.

He was polite. "If you will excuse me, sir. Mr. Goodwin?"

I nodded. "Miss Barstow expects me."

"Yes, sir. If you will come this way, Miss Barstow would like you to join her in the garden."

I followed him across the terrace and along a walk to the other side of the house, then down an arbor and among a lot of shrubbery till we came to an acre of flowers. Miss Barstow was on a shady bench over in a corner.

"All right," I said. "I see her."

He stopped, inclined his head, turned and went back.

She looked bad, worse than she had the day before. She probably hadn't slept much. Forgetting or disregarding Wolfe's instructions on that detail, she had telephoned before six o'clock. I had taken the call, and her voice had sounded as if she was having a hard time of it. She had been short and business like, just said she would expect me at ten in the morning and hung up.

She invited me to sit beside her on the bench.

At bedtime the evening before Wolfe had given me no instructions whatever. Saying that he preferred to leave me fancy free, he had merely repeated his favorite saying, any spoke will lead an ant to the hub, and had reminded me that our great advantage lay in the fact that no one was aware how much or how

little we knew and that on account of our original coup we were suspected of omniscience. He had finished, after a yawn that would have held a tennis ball: "Return here with that advantage unimpaired."

I said to Miss Barstow, "You may not have any orchids here, but you certainly have a flower or two."

She said, "Yes, I suppose so. — I asked Small to bring you out here because I thought we should not be interrupted. You will not mind."

"No, indeed. It's nice out here. I'm sorry to have to pester you, but there's no other way to get the facts. Wolfe says that he feels phenomena and I collect facts. I don't think that means anything, having looked up the word phenomena in the dictionary, but I repeat it for what it's worth." I took out my notebook. "First just tell me things. You know, the family, how old are you, who you're going to marry and so on."

She sat with her hands together in her lap and told me. Some of it I had read in the papers or got out of *Who's Who*, but I didn't interrupt. There was only her mother, her brother and herself. Lawrence, her brother, was twenty-seven, two years older than her; he had graduated from Holland at twenty-one and had then proceeded to waste five years (and, I gathered between the lines, a good portion of his father's time and patience also). A year ago he had suddenly discovered a talent for mechanical design and was now devoted to that, especially as applied to airplanes. Her mother and father had been mutually devoted for thirty years. She could not remember the beginning of her mother's difficulty, for that had been years before when Sarah was a child; the family had never considered it a thing to be ashamed of or to attempt to conceal, merely a misfortune of a loved one to sympathize with and as far as possible to ameliorate. Dr. Bradford and two specialists described it in neurological terms, but they had never meant anything to Sarah; to her the terms had been dead and cold and her mother was alive and warm.

The place in Westchester was the old Barstow family estate, but the family was able to be there less than three months of the year, since it was necessary to live at the university from September to June. They came each summer for ten or eleven weeks with the servants, and closed the place up each fall on leaving. They knew many people in the surrounding countryside; her father's circle of acquaintance had, of course, been wide, not only in Westchester, and some of his best and oldest friends lived within easy driving distance from the estate. She gave the names of these and I took them down. I also listed the names of the servants and details regarding them. I was doing that when Miss Barstow suddenly got up from the bench and moved away to the path in the sunshine, from under the shelter of the

trees that shaded us. There was the sound of an airplane overhead, so close that it had forced us to raise our voices. I went on writing, ". . . Finnish, 6 yrs, N Y agcy, sgl," and then looked at her. Her head was way back, showing all her throat, and she was looking straight up, one arm waving a handkerchief back and forth. I jumped out from under the trees and cocked an eye at the airplane. It was right over us, down low, and two arms could be seen extended, one from one side and one from the other, waving back at her. The plane dipped a little, then swung around and headed back, and soon was out of sight behind the trees. She went back to the bench and I joined her; she was saying:

"That was my brother. This is the first time he has been up since my father . . ."

"He must be pretty reckless, and he certainly has long arms."

"He doesn't fly; at least, not solo. That was Manuel Kimball with him, it's Mr. Kimball's plane."

"Oh. One of the foursome."

"Yes."

I nodded and went back to facts. I was ready for golf. Peter Oliver Barstow had not been a zealot, she said. He had rarely played at the university, and not oftener than once a week, occasionally twice, during the summer. He had nearly always gone to Green Meadow, where he was a member; he of course had had a locker and kept his paraphernalia there. He had been fairly good, considering the infrequency of his play, averaging from ninety-five to a hundred. He had played usually with friends his own age, but sometimes with his son or daughter. His wife had never tried it. The foursome of that fatal Sunday, E. D. Kimball and his son Manuel and Barstow and his son Lawrence, had never before played together, she thought. Probably it had been an accident of propinquity; her brother had not mentioned whether it had been prearranged, but she knew that he did sometimes have a game with Manuel. She especially doubted that the foursome had been arranged beforehand because it had been her father's first appearance at Green Meadow that summer; the Barstows had come to Westchester three weeks earlier than usual on account of Mrs. Barstow's condition, and Barstow had expected to return to the university that Sunday night.

When she had said that Sarah Barstow stopped. I glanced up from my notebook. Her fingers were twisted together and she was staring off at the path, at nothing. She said, not to me, "Now he will not return there at all. All the things he wanted to do . . . all he would have done . . . not at all. . . ."

I waited a little and then shook her out of it by asking, "Did your father leave his golf bag at Green Meadow all year?"

She turned back to me. "No. Why . . . of course not, because he

sometimes used them at the university."

"He had only the one bag of clubs?"

"Yes!" She seemed emphatic.

"Then he brought them with him? You only got here Saturday noon. You drove down from the university and the luggage followed in a truck. Was the bag in the car or in the truck?"

It was easy to see that I was touching something raw. Her throat showed muscles and her arms pressed ever so little against her sides; she was tightening up. I pretended I didn't notice it, just waited with my pencil. She said, "I don't know. Really, I don't remember."

"Probably in the truck," I said. "Since he wasn't much of a fan he probably wouldn't bother with it in the car. Where is it now?"

I expected that would tighten her up some more, but it didn't. She was calm but a little determined. "I don't know that either. I supposed you knew it can't be found."

"Oh," I said. "The golf bag can't be found?"

"No. The men from White Plains and Pleasantville have searched everywhere, this whole house, the club, even all over the links; they can't find it."

Yes, I thought to myself, and you, young lady, you're damn well pleased they can't! I said, "Do you mean to say that no one remembers anything about it?"

"No. That is, yes." She hesitated. "I understand that the boy who was caddying for Father says that he put the bag in the car, by the driver's seat, when they — when Larry and Dr. Bradford brought Father home. Larry and Dr. Bradford do not remember seeing it."

"Strange. I know I am not here to collect opinions, only facts, Miss Barstow, but if you will permit me, doesn't that strike you as strange?"

"Not at all. They were not likely to notice a golf bag at such a time."

"But after they got here — it must have been removed some time — some servant, the chauffeur . . ."

"No one remembers it."

"I may speak with them?"

"Certainly." She was scornful. I don't know what kind of a career she had mapped out, but I could have warned her not to try the stage.

That was that. It looked to me as if the kernel was gone, leaving practically no nut at all. I switched on her.

"What kind of a driver did your father use? Steel shaft or wooden?"

"Wood. He didn't like steel."

"Face plain or inset?"

"Plain, I think. I'm not sure I remember. Larry's has an inset, so has mine."

"You seem to remember your brother's all right."

"Yes." Her eyes were level at me. "This is not an inquisition, I believe, Mr. Goodwin."

"Pardon." I grinned at her. "Excuse it please, I'm upset. Maybe I'm

even sore. There's nothing in Westchester County I'd rather look at than that golf bag, especially the driver."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh no, you're not. It raises a lot of questions. Who took the bag out of the car? If it was a servant, which one, and how loyal and incorruptible is he? Five days later, when it became known that one of the clubs had performed the murder it had been designed for, who got the bag and hid it or destroyed it? You or your brother or Dr. Bradford? You see the questions I'm up against. And where is it hid or how was it destroyed? It isn't easy to get rid of a thing as big as that."

She had got up while I was talking and stood very composed and dignified. Her voice was composed too. "That will do. It wasn't in the agreement that I was to listen to idiotic insinuations."

"Bravo, Miss Barstow." I stood up too. "You're absolutely right, but I meant no offense, I'm just upset. Now, if I could see your mother for a moment. I won't get upset any more."

"No. You can't see her."

"That *was* in the agreement."

"You have broken it."

"Rubbish." I grinned. "It's the agreement that makes it safe for you to let me take liberties with it. Not with your mother. While I may be a roughneck, I know when to keep my gloves on."

She said, "Will five minutes be enough?"

"I don't know. I'll make it as short as possible."

She turned and started for the path that led towards the house, and I followed her. On the way I saw a lot of pebbles I wanted to kick. The missing golf bag was a hot one. Of course I hadn't expected to have the satisfaction of taking the driver back to Wolfe that evening, since Anderson would certainly have copped it. I gave him credit for being able to put two and two together after they had been set down for him ready to add; and I had counted on a request from Sarah Barstow to persuade him to let me give it the once over. But now — the whole damn bag was gone! Whoever had done it, it not only gave me a pain, it struck me as pretty dumb. If it had been just the driver it would have made sense, but why the whole bag?

The house inside was swell. I mean, it was the kind of a house most people never see except in the movies. While there were plenty of windows, the light didn't glare anywhere, it came in soft, and the rugs and furniture looked very clean and careful and expensive. There were flowers around and it smelled good and seemed cool and pleasant, because outdoors the sun was getting hot. Sarah Barstow took me through a big hall and a big room through to another hall, and on the other side of that through a door. Then we were in a sort of sun-room, with one side all glazed, though most of the blinds were pulled down nearly to

the floor so there wasn't much sunshine coming in. There were some plants, and a lot of wicker chairs and lounges. In one chair a woman sat by a table sorting out the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. Miss Barstow went over to her.

"Mother. This is Mr. Goodwin. I told you he was coming." She turned to me and indicated a chair. I took it. Mrs. Barstow let the jig-saw pieces drop from her fingers and turned to look at me.

She was very handsome. She was fifty-six, her daughter had told me, but she looked over sixty. Her eyes were gray, deep-set and far apart, her hair was nearly white, and while her face with its fine features was quite composed, I got the impression that there was nothing easy or natural about that; it came from the force of a strong personal will. She kept looking at me without saying anything until I was guessing that I didn't look very composed myself. Sarah Barstow had taken a chair some distance away. I was about ready to open up from my end when Mrs. Barstow suddenly spoke:

"I know your business, Mr. Goodwin."

I nodded. "It really isn't my business. It's my employer's. Mr. Nero Wolfe. He asked me to thank you for permitting me to come."

"He is welcome." The deep-set gray eyes never left me. "Indeed, I am grateful that someone — even a stranger — should acknowledge my authority over the doors of my house."

"Mother!"

"Yes, Sarah. Don't be offended, dear; I know — and it is of no importance whether this Mr. Goodwin does or not — that the authority has not been usurped. It was not you who forced me to resign it, nor even your father. According to Than, it was God; probably His hands were idle and Satan furnished the mischief."

"Mother, please." Sarah Barstow had got up and approached us. "If you have anything to ask, Mr. Goodwin . . ."

I said, "I have two questions. May I ask you two questions, Mrs. Barstow?"

"Certainly. That is your business."

"Good. The first one is easy to ask, but may be hard to answer. That is, it may require thought and a long memory. Of all people, you are the one probably in the best position to answer. Who wanted, or might have wanted, to kill Peter Oliver Barstow? Who had a grievance against him, a new one or maybe a very old one? What enemies did he have? Who hated him?"

"That isn't a question. It is four questions."

"Well . . . maybe I can hitch them together."

"It isn't necessary." The composure did not escape from the will. "They can all be answered at once. Myself."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

The Man Who

Crane couldn't understand why people screamed when they saw him. He didn't realize he was really dead.

BY BRUNO FISCHER

THE WOMAN looked at Jim Crane and screamed. She had come out of the tall brick house which he had just passed.

Crane stopped under the street-lamp and looked around. There was nobody else on that dark, empty street. The brick house stood off by itself, flanked by lots. He turned back to the woman.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She cowered in the doorway. Her voice had stopped with that one shrill outcry, but her mouth continued to hang open. She pointed jerkily at him with a forefinger.

"You — your —" she gasped.

Fright had driven her into almost speechless hysteria. Could she be frightened of him? That was crazy. He was sure he had never before seen this dumpy, middle-aged woman.

"What's wrong?" he said, going toward her.

She put out her hands as if to ward him off, and again she screamed.

Overhead a voice shouted: "Hey, you, keep away from her!"

A man in his underwear shirt was sticking his head out of a second-floor window. The woman was whimpering now.

"What the devil is going on?" Crane demanded.

"You beat it!" the man said. "You want me to call a cop?"

Both the woman and the man were mad, Crane told himself. If a

Copyright 1945 by Street and Smith Publications, Inc.

Lost His Head

cop arrived, it would be tough explaining that he hadn't tried to harm the woman in any way. People always took a woman's word against a man's. Best to get away from here.

He sent his long legs down the street. When he had gone a short distance, he looked back. The woman had come all the way out on the sidewalk and was staring after him. Crane wanted none of her; she seemed capable of chasing after him with wild accusations.

He was hurrying around the corner house when he heard the woman say in a loud, cracked voice: "Did you see him, Mr. Prim?"

"Sure I saw him." That was doubtless the man at the window replying. "Luckily I heard you and looked out and chased him off."

"I don't mean that. The poor man. He frightened me so."

Crane had not stopped walking. He could still hear the voices on the other street, but no longer the words. She was nuts, all right. What had she said? "*The poor man. He frightened me so.*" That wasn't sane talk. You met all kinds of people during a walk.

He stopped. A walk? He wasn't out for a walk. He had left his house to call on Ellen Hoyt, but this wasn't the way. This street and the other he had been on when the woman had screamed were unfamiliar.

He reached the farther intersection and looked up at the signpost. The motion of his head made his stomach churn, and he wondered why that should be. Then he forgot about his stomach when he saw that he was on the corner of Washington Avenue and Fourth Street.

Ellen Hoyt lived on Washington Avenue, but near Tenth Street. And he himself lived farther uptown. Ellen's apartment was between his home and where he now was. How in the world had he gone six blocks past his destination?

He stood at the signpost trying to remember. He had come home from his office and showered and shaved and left to take Ellen out to dinner. On pleasant evenings like this he preferred walking. But he didn't recall walking. He couldn't recall anything after having left his house until the woman in the doorway had screamed.

So he had been dreaming while strolling along, probably thinking of next month when he and Ellen would be married. He had passed Ellen's house without knowing it. Some time or other that happened to everybody. No use brooding about it.

Jim Crane crossed the street and headed toward Tenth Street. His stomach felt queasy. It had started, he remembered, when he had brought his head all the way back to look up at the signpost. His legs felt

wobbly too. What was the matter with him? Had the woman's screams upset him?

A neon sign ahead read: COFFEE. He decided that what was wrong with him was merely hunger. He had had a very light lunch at twelve and now it was around seven-thirty. A cup of coffee would hold him until he and Ellen got to the restaurant.

The lunchroom was small and grimy and deserted except for a burly counterman reading a racing form. Crane slid onto a counter stool and reached for his cigarettes.

"Coffee," he said.

The counterman looked up from his paper. He frowned. "You feel all right, Mister?"

"I—" Crane was feeling a lot better now that he was sitting. "Of course I'm all right," he said testily. "Why?"

"Well, you look sort of green."

Crane chuckled. "That's what comes of being an accountant. Too much indoor work. Mind rushing that coffee? I'm late."

The counterman looked sharply at him and then turned to the coffee urn. Behind the counter there was a flyspecked mirror which had been blocked off by the counterman's broad body. Now Crane saw himself in it, sitting hunched forward with his hat pulled low over his forehead and a cigarette dangling from his thin mouth. His long, angular face, he thought, looked like a death's head. He had never cared for his face, but Ellen said she loved it. But now it was pinched more than usual, and his complexion, which had always been sallow, was actually green.

I hope I'm not coming down with any sickness, he thought, and glanced at the wall clock over the door. It said twenty to eleven.

"Your clock's fast," he told the counterman as the coffee was set down before him.

"Maybe a couple of minutes."

"You mean three hours," Crane said and looked at his wristwatch. The hands read the same as those on the wall clock.

It couldn't be. He had left at seven-fifteen to reach Ellen's apartment at seven-thirty. He had gone out of his way, so maybe he was a few minutes late. But three hours? And without remembering a single minute of those hours?

In the mirror he saw fear spring into his eyes. "Listen," he said tensely. "Is this Friday, October 27th?"

The counterman's brows creased. "Sure it is, Mister. Say, you're as sick as you look if you ain't even sure what day it is."

Crane sighed. At least it wasn't amnesia or anything like that. But three hours lost!

Then he thought he had the answer. For some reason he had read the clock hands wrong. Not twenty to eleven, but five to eight. He turned his head again to look at the wall clock. He had been right the

first time; it was the hour hand which was almost on the eleven.

"Holy God!" the counterman said. "What happened to you, Mister?"

"Eh?"

Crane took his eyes from the clock. The counterman was racing around the counter. In bewilderment Crane watched him.

"Your head!" The counterman stepped behind Crane, and his voice was shrill with horror. "Holy God!"

Crane put a hand to the back of his neck. He felt the short hairs at the nape, matted as if stuck with glue.

"Blood?" he muttered incredulously.

"It's all over the back of your jacket and —" The counterman's eyes bugged. "Jeez, don't you feel nothing, Mister?"

"Why, no," Crane said slowly. "I felt a little sick to my stomach a little while ago, but it's gone away. It must be just a flesh wound."

"A flesh wound!" The counterman's manner suddenly became gentle and anxious. "Now don't you move, Mister. Stay right where you are. Just you sit there while I call an ambulance."

"Oh, come," Crane said in annoyance. "It can't be much if I don't feel it. I'll wash up at my girl friend's place."

"You stay where you are." The counterman dug a coin out of his apron and rushed to the phone booth. When he was inside, he stuck his head out. "Don't get off that chair, Mister. Don't try walking. Take it easy."

Crane scowled into his coffee. One thing was clear: the blow on his head was responsible for the three lost hours. But he couldn't remember what had happened. Had he fallen? Had somebody socked him and taken his money?

He fished out his wallet. Twenty-eight dollars — check. He had had nothing else of value on his person. So it had to be a fall. But where and how?

In the phone booth the counterman was saying: "Yeah, on Washington right off Fifth. And you better hurry."

What was the guy getting so excited about? So he had lost a little blood. The wound couldn't amount to much because he didn't feel any after-effects. Again Crane put his hand up to the back of his neck. Nothing there except dried blood. His hand started to move up.

That was when the street door opened and a thick-set, swarthy man came in. He started to close the door behind him and then froze. He gaped at Crane; his thick lips began to tremble and sweat formed beads on his brow.

Crane swung on his stool so he could face the newcomer directly. He was sure he had never before seen him. Yet this man was as scared of him as the woman in the doorway.

"Do you know me?" Crane asked, getting off the stool.

The swarthy man made a strangled sound deep in his throat, whirled through the door and slammed it behind him.

Crane felt himself shudder. Maybe the woman who had screamed had been frightened by the sight of blood and the counterman thought he was hurt badly enough to need treatment — but the swarthy man hadn't seen the back of his head. Crane had been turned partly toward him when he had entered.

What *had* happened during those three lost hours? Was the swarthy man in any way connected with the wound?

He moved to the door. Sidelong through the window, he saw the swarthy man standing thirty feet beyond the store, looking back. He seemed to be hesitating over something.

Anger gripped Crane. He'd get to the bottom of this. He'd make the swarthy man tell him why he was afraid of him.

He flung the door open. The counterman came out of the booth and yelled: "Hey, Mister, for God's sake! The ambulance's coming! Don't —"

Crane kept going.

The moment the swarthy man saw Crane appear in the street, he started walking rapidly uptown. He did not quite run.

"Just a minute," Crane called as he moved after him. "I only want to ask you —"

The swarthy man put his head down, dug his hands into his pockets and pumped his short legs. Crane's longer legs cut down the distance between them.

Then the swarthy man was out of sight around the Sixth Street corner. And when Crane rounded the corner, the other was waiting for him, with his wide shoulders pressed against the wall and a big ugly revolver in his hand.

"Keep away from me!" he said.

Crane blinked down at the gun. He said: "Don't be foolish. I only want to ask you how you happen to know me."

There wasn't much light, but Crane could see the other's face strained in fear. It didn't look like a face that frightened easily. It was a hard and cruel and ruthless face — or had been up to a minute ago.

"You're dead!" the swarthy man whimpered. "Don't touch me!"

Everybody he had met in the last few minutes was stark, raving mad, Crane told himself. Or maybe it was he himself who had lost his reason. He had to know. He decided to humor him.

"How do you know I'm dead?" Crane said. "If you never saw me before —"

The gun jerked up, and for the first time Crane realized the full menace of it. The idiot would shoot!

"You can't trick me," the swarthy man said hoarsely. "You want me to say right out how I know you're dead. You want to make sure. Well, this time *I'll* make sure."

And his hand contracted about the trigger of the gun.

There was a feeble click. Nothing else.

The swarthy man looked down at his gun. Then he looked up into Crane's face. With a choked cry, he dashed past Crane and wildly up the street.

Crane remained rooted to the spot, watching the flight of that stocky shape until it was out of sight. He did not try to follow. He was afraid of the gun which unaccountably had not killed him. And he was afraid of more than a gun — of something he did not understand or even know, but that now was becoming a dim, nagging memory in back of his consciousness.

A siren sounded and then an ambulance swept past him. Looking around the corner, he saw it come to a stop in front of the lunchroom. The ambulance was for him.

He hurried in the opposite direction. The wound wasn't important enough to delay him. Ellen was probably sore at him for not having shown up. Or worried. He had to get to her at once.

But Ellen was dead.

His breath came out in a sobbing gasp. He stopped walking and then resumed almost at once. What had made that absurd thought pop into his head? He had spoken to her on the phone at six o'clock this evening. He had had a date with her at 7:30, but something had happened on the way over.

Ellen was dead. Ellen was dead.

There it was again, a voice inside of him telling him with dreadful certainty.

"No!" he said aloud. "That blow; it's making me imagine things."

Ellen lay face down in a pool of her own blood.

"Stop it," he said fiercely. "She's all right. She's fine. She had a nasty experience this morning, but nothing happened to her and she spoke to you at six o'clock. It's you who were bleeding. It's you who were hurt."

How badly hurt? He seemed to have no physical effects, yet he was having a mental reaction that was giving him terrible thoughts. He felt the back of his head, the dried blood caked at the nape. There should be a cut higher up. His hand moved up almost to the hat band.

There was no skull. His fingers kept going in.

He staggered. His hand jerked away. *I'm dead*, he thought. *That's what scared those people. The top of my head is gone. The swarthy man knew I couldn't be alive.*

He recovered, telling himself that he must have lost sensation in his fingertips. A wound always felt worse than it was.

By the light of a street-lamp he could see his reflection in the window of a clothing store. The collar of his light tweed jacket was smeared with blood; a dried splotch of it trailed between his shoulders. But no matter how he turned, he could

not get the back of his head into his line of vision.

He stepped into the store vestibule. The door glass was also like a mirror; it was at an angle with the store window so that he could see the back of his head. He removed his hat.

A section of skull had sunk into his head, and there was shredded bone where the hair did not cover it. It wasn't bleeding now and had probably not bled enough to have greatly weakened him. Had the blood clotted? Was the horribly pressed-in bone still a covering for the wound? He could not see well, but he had seen enough.

Yet he felt nothing but shock, and it shook him for a long minute. Then, carefully, he placed his hat far back on his head, covering the visible bone. He fumbled a cigarette out of his pocket and used half a book of matches.

The screaming of the woman in the doorway now made sense. She had seen the back of his skull when he had passed under the light, and the horror of it had unnerved her. The counterman had retained only a little more self-control. But where did the swarthy man come in?

He hadn't seen the wound. Crane had always been facing him.

And Ellen was dead, lying in a pool of her own blood.

No! His mind had been affected by the blow. Desperately he tried to think. He had left his house and then a woman had screamed. Somewhere in that period Ellen had died. That was all there was, and it had to be a lie.

He found himself walking, and he was fighting the tremendous urge to rush to the nearest doctor, to the nearest hospital for a chance to survive. But first he had to see Ellen.

He did not remember covering the few remaining blocks. Suddenly he was inside the apartment house, pressing the button for the automatic elevator. He rode up to the third floor, walked up the hall, turned the corner — and there was a uniformed policeman standing in front of Ellen's door.

His knees started to buckle. The cop leaped forward, grabbed his arm.

"You're hurt?" the cop asked, peering into his face. "You look sick. Say, who are you?"

Crane fought himself erect. "I'm all right. My name is James Crane and I —"

"We been looking for you," the cop broke in excitedly.

The cop pushed the door open. There were half a dozen men in Ellen's compact one-room apartment. And Ellen was there.

She lay face down on the floor, with her long brown hair spread about her face like a halo. And there was blood in her hair and on the rug — blood which had run out of the hideous hole in her head.

It was like coming back to the scene of a tragedy, where he had been before. Three hours ago, he knew now, he had seen her like this.

"Crane, eh?" A man with fiery eyes stood in front of him. "I'm Lieutenant Blanchard."

Crane leaned weakly against the wall. "We were to be married next month," he muttered.

A little of it was coming back to Crane. He remembered being inside this apartment three hours ago and staring down at Ellen lying dead in her own blood. He had heard a sound behind him and had started to turn, but he had never had a chance to complete that turn. And then blankness.

Crane said: "He hit me, too. Look." He took off his hat and turned his back to the room.

A startled gasp went up from the men. The lieutenant said sharply: "Dr. Rowland!" A chubby-faced man, who was doubtless the coroner, gently took Crane's arm and led him to the couch. Crane lay down and pressed his face into the cushion.

Fingers probed the back of his skull, but seemed to avoid the wound. Dr. Rowland said incredulously: "You mean to say you've been walking around like this?"

"I feel all right," Crane muttered. "Except once when I threw back my head too quickly to look at a signpost. It made me sick to my stomach for a few minutes. Will I be all right?"

"We'll have you fixed up in no time."

Lieutenant Blanchard asked: "Could that wound have been self-inflicted?"

"Nonsense!" Dr. Rowland straightened up. "He was struck from behind."

There was silence then. Even the murmuring of the other men in the room had ceased. Crane turned his face on the cushion and saw that Blanchard and Dr. Rowland had crossed to the other side of the room and were constulting in whispers. But the room was small and only disjointed phrases reached him.

". . . nothing I can do here," Dr. Rowland was saying. ". . . hospital . . . even there . . . should have died instantly . . . bone pressing . . ."

His voice got too low. Then Blanchard was speaking and Crane strained to hear.

". . . left here under his own power . . . came back . . . talks all right and . . ."

Dr. Rowland shook his head and his voice rose testily, so that Crane got full sentences.

"It's one of these phenomena we can't quite explain. I've come across it before in similar injuries. The person does not even suspect that he is fatally injured. He may feel and act normal for a considerable period, and then, suddenly—" Dr. Rowland glanced at Crane, saw how intensely he was listening and lowered his voice.

Crane buried his head in the cushion. He could finish the doctor's sentence: — *and, then, suddenly, he drops dead.* He had had a cousin who had received a head injury in an

auto accident. His cousin had got up and walked home, acting normally, and a couple of hours later he had collapsed and died.

The swarthy man was right, Crane thought dully. *I'm dead. But not yet dead enough for him.*

"Lieutenant," he said aloud. "I know who did it. It was the man who held Ellen up this morning."

Blanchard returned to the side of the couch. "What do you know about the holdup?"

"Only what Ellen told me over the phone."

Crane spoke with his eyes closed and the side of his face against the cushion. "Ellen worked for a paper mill, in the office. Among other things, she handled the payroll. It was lunch hour and she was the only one in the office. She was behind in getting the payroll out and planned to have lunch later. She was putting the money into the envelopes when two armed men with handkerchiefs tied over their faces came in. One stayed at the door to watch if anybody came from the plant. The other gathered up the money. As he was about to leave, the knot became untied from his handkerchief and it fell from his face. He shot at Ellen, but missed. She dropped behind a desk. By then there was an uproar outside and the man whose face Ellen had seen couldn't take the time to go around the desk after her. He and the other man fled.

"Late this afternoon Ellen phoned me at my office. She was very upset. She had just come from police headquarters where she had been shown photos, but she hadn't seen the gunman's. She could describe him only vaguely because he had no outstanding characteristics, but she was sure she would recognize him if she ever saw him again. I told her I'd be over right after work to take her out to dinner and help her get over her terrible experience. At six o'clock I phoned her again. She said she was feeling better. But when I got here at seven-thirty —" Crane's voice broke.

"Go on," Blanchard urged.

"Ellen didn't answer the door when I rang. I found it unlocked. I walked in and there was Ellen just the way she is now. Then I heard somebody behind me, and that's all I know." Crane shivered. "I guess after a while I recovered consciousness and picked up my hat and went out, but I don't remember."

"And you didn't see the guy?"

"Not then," Crane said. "But later." And he told about the swarthy man.

Lieutenant Blanchard frowned. "The man she described was tall and rather gaunt."

"Then it was the other man who murdered us," Crane said.

One of the detectives in the room uttered an exclamation. Every pair of eyes stared at Crane. He realized what he had said. *Us! The man had murdered us!*

Well, wasn't that the truth?

He wet his lips and went on: "The

swarthy man must have been the gunman whose face Ellen didn't see. In fact, he was mostly outside the door during the holdup, so she hadn't even been able to describe his build. But he was the one who murdered her."

Gravely Blanchard nodded. "It's likely."

Crane got up on one elbow and felt bitterness choke him. "Damn you, didn't you know she'd be in danger? Wasn't she entitled to police protection?"

Blanchard said quietly, "She didn't identify anybody. We didn't have the photo in our gallery. Why should anybody guess she wouldn't be safe?"

"You cops let her die!" Crane cried. "The gunman must have had a police record elsewhere. He was afraid Ellen would be shown photos from other cities. Sooner or later she would have spotted him. He couldn't let her live."

Dr. Rowland placed a hand on his shoulder. "Take it easy, son . . . Lieutenant, I can't allow this man to be excited."

Blanchard shrugged. The gesture said: *He's practically a dead man anyway, so what difference does it make?*

An ambulance interne arrived with the driver who carried a stretcher. The interne glanced down at Crane, whistled softly, and did nothing to treat the wound. It was too dangerous, or useless. The fact remained that they were taking him to die away from here.

When they transferred him to the stretcher, Crane opened his mouth to protest that he could walk under his own power. But it was less effort to let them just carry him away. Nothing was important. Ellen was dead, and so he was not afraid of death.

But there was something to be done. He wasn't sure just what it was and lay thinking about it until cool air washed over him and he knew that he was in the street. Then he saw it.

"Wait a minute!" Crane said, lifting his head.

The stretcher stopped. The interne, holding the front end, turned his head to look down at him.

"There's not a thing that can be done for me," Crane said. "I know. I should by rights be dead. Ellen was struck no harder than I was. There must be a reason why I was kept alive. Twice I should have died and didn't — the second time when the swarthy man shot at me and nothing happened. I've been thinking, and the only answer is that I've been given time to find Ellen's murderer. That's why the swarthy man was sent my way when I was in the lunchroom, but I didn't know who he was then. Now I've got to find him again."

The driver said: "He's starting to rave, Doc."

"No," Crane insisted. "My brain has never been clearer. That's another miracle, because the bits of bone are pressing into my brain.

And why didn't I bleed to death?"

"Lie still," the interne told him. "You can never tell about those head injuries. No two act the same way."

"Why bother kidding me?" Crane said wearily. "I've been lent time to find Ellen's murderer. It can't be any other way. So you've got to let me go."

"We'll fix you up fine in the hospital," the interne said soothingly. "Then you can go anywhere you like. Let's go, George."

As the stretcher started to move again, Crane considered making a break for it. But they would have their hands on him before he could get off the stretcher, and a struggle might be too much for him. He had to stretch his borrowed time. Perhaps when they reached the hospital they would leave him alone in the ambulance long enough for him to slip away.

They slid the stretcher into the ambulance. The driver went around to the front. The interne was about to climb inside with Crane when he paused to slap his pockets.

"Got a cigarette, George?" he called.

"You know I don't use 'em. There's a drugstore still open at the corner."

The interne sauntered off. Slowly Crane sat up. Through the still-open doors the street stretched out before him. He had told them that he wanted to escape, but they had put that down to the ravings of a badly hurt man. And they were not guarding him now because they could not conceive of a man with a wound like that getting up and walking away.

Then he was standing outside the ambulance, glancing cautiously about the empty street for either the interne or the driver. He was alone.

Not quite alone. The tail of his eye caught movement in the dark doorway across the street. No more than that. No definite shape — only a stirring of deeper shadows. But he knew that it had to be the swarthy man, because he had been kept alive for only one reason. He started across the street.

The shadow moved out of the doorway and became the stocky figure of a man. He peered at Crane with his head far forward. He pulled his gun out.

Crane felt no fear. He kept going across the gutter. The swarthy man had been placed here for him by the same power that was keeping him, Crane, alive.

And the swarthy man did not shoot. With the revolver dangling forgotten from his swinging hand, he raced down the street.

Crane broke into a run. At once nausea seized him. His head reeled; he almost fell. *Careful*, he told himself. *That's one thing you can't do.*

He walked as rapidly as he could. He followed the swarthy man around the corner, and when he saw him again, the distance between them had grown to a hundred feet. Crane ran two steps and brought himself

up short before he keeled over. He could not run without jerking his head. A sob of helplessness tore from his throat. He kept walking, but the other was already out of sight.

After a while Crane leaned against the wall of a house to rest. He was sick now to the core of his being and his hat seemed to weigh a ton. Only he wasn't wearing a hat; it had been left in Ellen's apartment. He knew then that he hadn't much more time.

Suddenly he laughed with a bitterness that shook him. If some sort of divine Providence was keeping him alive for a certain job, then why hadn't Providence let him complete the job by catching the swarthy man? Now he had the whole city to hunt for him. That would baffle even the police, with limitless time and manpower.

But wait. There had to be a logical explanation why he had twice come across the swarthy man in the last hour. The second one was easy. The swarthy man had murdered Ellen; he had returned to the scene of the crime to learn if there were any developments which affected him.

And the first time? The swarthy man had been entering a lunchroom. He hadn't known Crane would be there. He had been shocked nearly out of his wits at the sight of the man he thought he had killed. He had merely dropped into a neighborhood lunchroom for food.

Neighborhood! The swarthy man lived somewhere near the lunchroom.

Crane did not remember walking those five blocks. It was as if his brain had blacked out, and when he came out of it, he was looking at a neon sign which said: COFFEE. The weight on his head was becoming unbearable. His legs were turning to water.

Well, here he was, and except for an occasional passing car, the city slept. He moved on, slowly now, fighting to keep his thoughts from clouding and his legs from folding.

Running feet broke the silence. He stood very still, concentrating on the receding sound. And then, far down on the other side of the street, he glimpsed a fleeting shadow. Abruptly it swung away from the curb and vanished through a doorway.

It did not occur to Crane that it might not be the swarthy man he had seen. This was the completion of a pattern which had gone beyond his own logical reasoning. He did not doubt that he had been deliberately brought here for the same reason that he was still alive.

There was a fire hydrant where the shape had left the street, so he was sure of the exact spot. The hydrant was in front of a box-like two-story building. The ground floor consisted of a grocery store, and lights were in the two windows above.

There was a door to be entered, a dimly lit staircase to climb, and then

a small hall and another door. Men were speaking beyond that door.

One voice Crane recognized as that of the swarthy man, even though now it was shrill with terror. "I tell you, Flick, he's haunting me. Go on, laugh, but I killed that guy. I told you how he came in just when I got done with the girl, so I had to give him the business too."

"How do you know he was dead?" a bantering voice asked.

"I know how to hit 'em. It's nice and quiet and not messy. A sock on the head and they're dead before they hit the floor. And I saw what I did to that guy. Hell, half his head was knocked in."

"Did you make sure he was dead?"

"I wasn't hanging around there longer than I had to," the swarthy man replied hesitantly. "Well, all right, say I didn't finish him. But what would he be doing hours later sitting in Steve's lunchroom, drinking coffee as calm as you please? He'd be dead or in a hospital. And he knew me, Flick. He never seen me before. How the hell did he know me? And he went after me. My gun didn't scare him none. And when I pulled the trigger, nothing happened."

"You missed him?"

"The gun was right up against him. But no bullet came out. The gun didn't shoot, and I'd just oiled and cleaned it for that payroll job."

The man named Flick chuckled, "Guns miss fire lots of times."

"Maybe. So all right, the gun missed fire. So I went back to the house to see if the cops were there. They were there all right. I didn't get it. Say this guy was hurt bad, would they let him go? Then an ambulance pulls up and they carry somebody out. It's the guy, I think. Maybe I been dreaming I seen him. Then all of a sudden there he is, not in the ambulance. He's coming across the street, straight to where I'm standing. He couldn't see me. I tell you, he couldn't. I was in a doorway. But he came straight at me. So I ran."

"You're a brave lad."

"Yeah, it's funny to you. Sure I was scared. He chased after me, but the funny thing is he didn't run. He kept walking, like he knew I couldn't get away from him. But I shook him off with no trouble. I cut through yards. I went out of my way. A blood hound couldn't have followed me." His voice faded and then rose stridently: "Listen, Flick! I'm downstairs on this street and I look back — and there he is. And he's still walking, like nothing can stop him."

"You damn fool! Did he see you come in here?"

"What's the difference? He knows where we live. But how does he know? That's what I'm asking. He's supposed to be dead. I killed him."

"Of all the saps!" Flick shouted. "Maybe he's calling the cops. Go look for him."

"He don't need cops, Flick. He'll

come himself. He knew all along where we lived and he didn't bring no cops."

"Then go out and get him."

"I'm scared."

"You got a gun. Use it."

There was a brief silence. Then the swarthy man said more quietly: "I get the dirty jobs. I kill the girl for you. I get sent out to kill a guy I killed once already."

"Don't be a damn fool. I'll be with you as soon as I get my pants on."

The door opened so suddenly that Crane had no time to retreat. In the dimness of the hall, he stood facing the swarthy man.

An insane moan trickled from the swarthy man's lips. He said brokenly, "Flick!" and reached under his shoulder.

Crane had no plan of action. He simply moved in, and his body struck the swarthy man and the arm which was coming out with the gun. The arm and wrist and gun-muzzle were pressed against the swarthy man at the instant the fingers contracted on the trigger.

Thunder shook the small hall. The swarthy man fell away from Crane and slumped against the wall. His eyes stared sightlessly. He was dead.

"All right, guy," a voice said hoarsely. "Reach."

Crane lifted his gaze. A tall, gaunt man wearing only underwear stood in the doorway, and a black automatic was in his hand. The face was the one Ellen had described.

"So you're the lad who's been haunting Carlos." The gaunt man's eyes flicked to the dead man and back. "How much do you know?"

Crane swayed. His knees quivered; his shoulders were bowed under the weight of his head. But he felt no fear. He felt only a little relief that he was so near the end. He said: "I know that he murdered Ellen and that you are her murderer too."

The gaunt face tightened. "What I want to know is, do the cops know?"

"They don't have to know," Crane said. His voice sounded flat and unfamiliar in his ear. "I'm going to kill you." And he moved forward.

The gun roared. Crane paused at the impact of the bullet and then resumed motion.

"Stay back!" the gaunt man gasped. "I hit you!" He retreated backward into his room. His face fell to pieces with terror.

Crane smiled. "You can't kill a dead man," he said and lunged.

The gun spoke again as Crane's hands closed over that skinny neck. He felt nothing. He was past physical sensation.

He fell with the gaunt man under him. Once more there was the sound of a gun, distant and unimportant. Inches from his own face. Crane saw another face that no longer looked quite human. The eyes bulged, the tongue protruded, the skin turned purple.

There was no warning. Between one breath and another, James Crane ceased to be.

They had a great deal of trouble loosening the dead fingers from the skinny throat of the other corpse.

Dr. Rowland was puzzled. "The shooting was heard only twenty minutes ago. Rigor shouldn't have set in so firmly."

Lieutenant Rowland turned from the hall where he had been looking down at the body of the swarthy man. "Crane must have continued to hang on while he was dying from the bullet wounds."

Dr. Rowland frowned and said nothing. After a while he stood up. "Crane was hit three times, but none of the bullets could have been fatal. He was bound to drop dead any moment. The exertion of the struggle finished him."

Blanchard drew smoke deep into his lungs. "But not until he had killed these two."

"I don't understand."

"You remember what the ambulance interne told us," Blanchard said. "Crane was raving about being kept alive by something so he could avenge his sweetheart's murder. He lived just long enough to do it."

Dr. Rowland sniffed. "Nonsense. Crane wasn't the first man I've seen alive who by all laws of medical science should be dead, especially where brain injuries are concerned."

"Maybe." Blanchard studied the cloud of smoke he expelled. "You're the doctor, so why should I argue?"

Suicide

Everybody kept telling Liddell it was suicide. But Liddell had different ideas — ideas that led to murder. . . .

BY FRANK KANE

JOHNNY LIDDELL bit off the end of the cigar, spat it in the general direction of the spittoon. He scraped a wooden match on the sole of his shoe, lit the end of the cigar and inhaled deeply.

"Nobody's convincing me that Johnny Carroll killed himself," he said flatly. He blew a cascade of

Copyright, 1945,
by Columbia Publications Inc.

dirty white smoke ceilingward.

"You might as well ask me to believe that Stalin became a Capitalist. And I won't believe it."

Detective Sergeant Terence Grady grunted.

His cold, grey eyes studied the private dick's face. "I've got to believe the evidence of my own eyes, Johnny," he said. "He was still warm when we got there. He did the job himself; no question about that."

Johnny Liddell growled. "He wouldn't give the world a break like that, Terry. He was mean enough to live forever."

He tapped a thin film of ash to the floor.

"A guy that has so many birds out gunning for him just naturally doesn't knock himself off. Just makes no sense."

The detective sergeant fumbled through his jacket pockets, came up with a paper pack of cigarettes. "This one did, Johnny."

He hung a cigarette in the corner of his mouth where it waggled as he talked.

"Ever hear of a guy like Johnny Carroll letting anybody stick a rod in his mouth and blowing out his brains? Easy, stands there with his mouth wide open?"

He lit the cigarette, flipped the burnt match on the table so it fell square into the plate.

"There wasn't any sign of a struggle; even his clothes weren't mussed or wrinkled."

"How about the gun? His?"

"It was his," Terry Grady nodded. "Kept it in the drawer of his table in the library."

Johnny Liddell digested that bit of information. "That's where he was found, isn't it?"

The homicide dick nodded.

"Fingerprints on the gun?" Johnny Liddell asked.

"Just his own," Grady grinned. "That makes your hunch bat 1,000, doesn't it, Johnny? Shot through the mouth; no struggle; his own gun and nobody else's prints on the gun. That sure makes it out a good case of murder."

Johnny Liddell grunted. "Sure, sure. It sounds screwy, but not as screwy as the idea of Johnny Carroll knocking himself off!" He inhaled deeply, frowned fiercely at an imaginary spot on the ceiling. "Bullet match the gun?"

Detective Terence Grady plucked at a minute crumb of tobacco on his lower lip. "Haven't got the bullet yet," he admitted. "Not that it's important —"

The frown left Johnny Liddell's face. "Who says it's not important?" He scraped his chair back, pulled himself to his feet. "Your whole suicide theory falls to pieces unless you can match up the slug and the rod. Even a homicide dick ought to know that."

Grady motioned him back into his chair. "Relax, Sherlock. It came from the same gun all right. His doc says —" Johnny interrupted

"What do you mean his doc? Didn't the M. E. see him?"

The homicide dick nodded patiently. "Sure, sure. Only his doc, Matthews I think his name is, was there when we got there. Emmy Wilson, Carroll's secretary, found him and called Matthews right off. His office is in the same building."

Johnny Liddell applied his tongue to a loose piece of tobacco on the cigar, pressed it back into place. "I didn't know Carroll was doctoring."

"There's a lot of things you don't know, Sherlock," Terence Grady chided. "It seems that Johnny Carroll was doctoring for a cancer of the throat. The doc came in to see him three times a week."

"How bad was the throat?"

The homicide dick shook his head. "It's a funny thing about that. Doc Matthews says it was mostly in Carroll's head. He kept imagining his throat was bad and insisted that the doc keep coming in." He shrugged expressively. "After all, his dough was as good at the doc's bank as any other patient's."

Johnny Liddell screwed his eyes up into a thoughtful scowl. "Then we only have the doc's word for it that Carroll thought he had cancer?"

"Well, I guess Carroll's secretary would back him up on that." He studied the private dick's face. "What's buzzing around in that skull of yours, Johnny?" he asked.

"I don't know," Johnny Liddell admitted. "How's for looking Carroll's apartment over?"

Terence Grady squeezed out his cigarette on the corner of the wooden-topped table. He had had enough experience with Johnny Liddell's hunches in the past not to run counter to them.

The uniformed man on duty outside Johnny Carroll's apartment saluted smartly as Terence Grady and Johnny Liddell entered. He did not succeed entirely in wiping the boredom out of his eyes.

"Through here in the study." Grady led the way. He stopped in the doorway. "There's where he was, right next to the desk."

Johnny Liddell stared at the chalked outline left by the coroner's men. He transferred his eyes to the ceiling. There was no evidence of a bullet scar in the plaster.

"You said the slug tore through the top of Carroll's head?" he asked. The homicide man nodded. "Then how come no bullet in the ceiling?" Johnny Liddell wanted to know.

Detective Sergeant Terence Grady pushed his fedora back on his head. "Just a freak probably. Maybe by the time it tore through his skull it was spent. We'll find it on the floor someplace."

Johnny Liddell grinned. "Spent? Just going through the top of his head? Not unless he had it reinforced with bullet-proof steel." He walked over to the chalk-outlined space, stood looking around. "Which way was the body lying?"

Grady stared and then shrugged. "Facing the door, I think. Why?"

Johnny Liddell scowled, stood inside the chalk outline, and faced the door. Then he turned around and looked behind him. "A glass door, eh?" He walked toward the door, examined the glass. "No sign of a hole. It didn't go through the door, so he must have been facing the bookcase." He stared for a moment, then nodded his head. "Sure, that would be right. The desk would be at his back —"

The homicide man stared. "I don't like to be picky, Sherlock, but how about letting a poor working man in on your brainstorm?"

Johnny Liddell ignored him, walked to the desk. "That would mean that wall — the one with the tapestry."

"What about it?" Grady growled.

"That's where your bullet probably is. In the wall underneath the tapestry."

Grady made the tapestry-covered wall in five steps. He pulled aside the tapestry, peered a moment, then grunted. "Right on the head, Sherlock. How'd you guess?"

Johnny Liddell grinned. "Elementary, my dear Watson. Elementary." He hoisted a thick thigh onto the corner of the desk and watched patiently as the homicide dick pried the misshapen hunk of lead out of the wall with a penknife.

"This still doesn't change the fact that he knocked himself off." Grady's voice wasn't quite so final. He carried the lead pellet in his palm as though it were priceless.

Johnny Liddell ignored the statement. "How much money did you find around the place?" he asked.

"Just a couple of hundred bucks he had in his pocket. Why?"

Johnny Liddell shrugged. "Just curious." He fingered the desk furnishings. "How's chances of seeing this doc you spoke about?"

Terence Grady nodded. "Raftery?" he called. The door opened and the bored-looking cop stuck his head in. "Run downstairs and see if Doc Matthews is in. Tell him we want to see him."

The cop saluted, withdrew his head.

Johnny Liddell wandered aimlessly about the room, picking up small objets d'art and replacing them. "How about Carroll's secretary, Emmy Wilson? Any chance of seeing her for a few minutes?"

"What's going 'round in that skull of yours, Johnny?" the homicide dick growled. "If you've got any ideas, spill 'em, but don't horse me around. This case is closed as suicide and for my part I'm willing to let it stay like that, unless —"

"Unless I deliver a killer all wrapped up in cellophane and with a pink bow on his hair? Well, maybe I can do that, too."

Terence Grady stared at the private dick, then shrugged. "I can call Emmy. She'd be here in a few minutes —"

Johnny Liddell nodded. He dropped into a large leather overstuffed chair while the homicide dick

dialed. While Grady was talking to the girl, the door opened and a tall, thin man entered.

"I'm Dr. Matthews," he said. "Did you gentlemen want to see me?" His eyes had a disturbing habit of twitching as he spoke.

Johnny Liddell nodded, indicated a chair with a toss of his head. The doctor sat on the edge of a chair and waited patiently for Grady to get off the phone. Finally, the homicide dick hung up.

"Emmy'll be right over," he told Liddell. Then, turning to the doctor, "Sorry to bother you, doc. Mr. Liddell here thought you might be able to help us out. He wanted to ask a couple of questions."

The doctor nodded jerkily, turned his eyes to Liddell.

"Know Johnny Carroll very well, Doc?" Liddell asked.

The tall, thin man shrugged. "He's been a patient of mine for some time now. I've known him in that capacity."

"Know what his business was, Doc?" Liddell's voice was soft. He was apparently interested in a spot inches over the doctor's head.

The doctor's eyes twitched. "A gambler, wasn't he? I mean, I've read quite a bit about him."

Johnny Liddell nodded. "Yeah, a gambler. Ever play the horses, Doc? Or roulette?"

The doctor's eyes roved from Liddell's face to the homicide dick's. He pulled himself erect. "I don't see what this has to do with —"

Johnny Liddell pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, stuck one in his mouth, lit it. "Take it easy, Doc. It'd be easy enough to find out if you owed Carroll any dough —"

The thin man seemed to shrink. He sat down heavily. "Oh, I see. You wanted to know if I owed him any money?" His eyes twitched maddeningly. "Well, matter of fact I did. A couple of hundred dollars —"

Terence Grady got to his feet. "What's going on, Johnny?" He permitted himself to be waved to silence by the private dick.

"What's with this cancer of the throat gag?" Liddell asked.

The doctor raised a shaking hand to his mouth. "Somehow he got the idea he had a cancer. Insisted on being treated. I prescribed an antiseptic spray and tried to talk him out of it. I — I never realized he would —"

Johnny Liddell blew a twin stream of smoke through his nostrils. "Can the act, Doc. You know Carroll never bumped himself."

The doctor's face was ashen as he jumped to his feet. "I don't know what you mean. I examined the body. He'd killed himself. His gun was there beside him!"

Johnny Liddell's voice was lazy. "How do you know it was his gun, Doc?"

"I've seen it before. He always had it near him."

Terence Grady's eyes went from the shaking figure of the physician

to the indolent figure of the private dick in the chair. He started to say something, then changed his mind, clamped his lips.

Johnny Liddell solemnly regarded the glowing end of his cigarette. "When was the last time you saw the gun?" he asked.

The doctor rubbed the back of his hand across his lips. "This afternoon. I had been examining his throat. He opened the drawer to get the money to pay me. It was laying there. I commented on it —"

"What then?" Terence Grady's voice was harsh. He was leaning forward with interest. "What then, Matthews?"

The twitching eyes darted from face to face. "I — I picked it up. Firearms have always had a fascination for me —"

"Then you killed him," Grady accused.

"No, no. I gave the gun to him. He gave me the money, dropped the gun into the drawer and closed it —"

The door opened to admit the head of the bored cop. "The secretary's here, sergeant. Says you wanted to see her."

Terence Grady growled under his breath. "Okay, send her in," he told the cop.

Emmy Wilson reeked of Broadway from her blondined head to the nyloned leg her dress generously exposed. She looked from face to face, nodded at the doctor.

"What goes?" she asked.

"We're just about to decide who murdered your boss," Johnny Liddell informed her. His eyes took bold inventory of her obvious assets.

Her eyes became round. "Murdered? You're kidding. He killed himself. The cops said so." She turned to Terence Grady. "Is this a gag, Lieutenant?"

"Sergeant," Grady corrected her sadly.

"But how?" the girl asked.

Johnny Liddell struggled to his feet. "The thing that led everybody to believe that he knocked himself off is the fact that he got shot through the mouth." He looked at Detective Sergeant Grady. "Sure, Johnny Carroll never would let anybody stick a rod in his mouth. But suppose he didn't know it was a rod?"

Terence Grady stood up, slid his hand into his jacket pocket. The doctor straightened up in his chair, stared ahead of him.

"If Carroll had stuck the rod into his mouth and had pulled the trigger, then the bullet would have gone through and into the ceiling," Johnny Liddell continued. "But it didn't. It went into the wall." He paused to let that sink in. "Know why? Because Johnny Carroll had his head thrown back when the gun was shoved into his mouth. Thrown back the way it would be if somebody was treating his throat —"

Emmy Wilson jumped from her chair. Her mouth was a round "O" of horror. She looked at Doc Matthews with loathing. "That must

have been the way it happened. I knew you hated him. You always hated him —"

The thin form of the doctor seemed to shrink even further in his clothes. He wiped his mouth with his hand, his eyes twitched painfully. "I didn't. I didn't, I tell you."

"Arrest him, Sergeant," Emmy Wilson ordered. Her eyes were hot beds of fire. "He killed Johnny Carroll."

Detective Sergeant Terence Grady grabbed the thin man by the shoulder. "Let's go, bud," he said.

Johnny Liddell's voice was calm, unhurried. "Why not listen to the end of the story?" He settled one hip on the corner of the desk. Grady let go the doctor's shoulder, but stood behind his chair. "There was the case of the gun. The doc admits having handled it —"

"But I told you how that happened," Doc Matthews wailed.

"Sure, Doc. And that's maybe going to save you from the chair." He ground out his cigarette in the glass ash tray on the desk. "After all, doc, we wouldn't want you to burn for a killing that Emmy Wilson did, would we?"

Detective Sergeant Terence Grady's jaw dropped. New life seemed to come into the doctor's face.

"Is this a rib?" Emmy Wilson's white little teeth showed in a snarl. "If it is, I ain't amused." She started to get up.

"It won't work, Emmy," Johnny Liddell sighed. "It had to be either the doc or you. It ain't the doc, so it's got to be you."

The girl moved like lightning. She was out of her chair and halfway across the room before Grady could yell. When he did, the door opened and the bored-looking copper stuck his head in. The bored look disappeared as he caught two armsful of fighting curves. It took him almost a minute to subdue her.

"Okay, Johnny," Grady grunted when Emmy had been returned to her chair. "Why?"

Johnny Liddell grinned, offered a cigarette to the doctor who accepted it gratefully. "Like I said, it was either the doc or Emmy. Johnny Carroll could never let anybody else get close enough to shove a rod or anything else in his kisser." He lit his cigarette, held the match for the doc. "When I found the slug in the wall, I was sure of two things. Johnny had been bumped, and he had been bumped by someone who he thought was taking care of his throat."

Grady grunted. "Sounds like the doc."

"That's what I kept thinking," Johnny Liddell admitted. "Yet, there are so many better ways a doc can bump a guy off, particularly if he's going to write the death certificate. Besides, Emmy as Carroll's secretary would probably do all his throat spraying. And a gun barrel isn't too different from a spray nozzle. Anyway not too different!"

Doc Matthews leaned forward. "But what decided you?"

"Well, when you admitted that you'd handled the gun, I began to see how it shaped up."

Detective Grady scratched his head. "I don't see where that fits. So what if he handled the gun?"

Johnny Liddell tapped a thin film of ash into the glass ash tray. "Because there were no prints on the gun except Carroll's." He looked up. "When the killer wiped his own prints off, he wiped everybody else's off, including the doc's. The doc had no reason to do that. He's already admitted handling the gun—and he wouldn't have done that except that he probably thought we'd found his prints on it. Therefore, it must have been Emmy."

The girl struggled to her feet. "He had it coming to him," she screamed. "He'd had it coming from away back."

Johnny Liddell took a last drag from his cigarette. "Then there was the matter of the money in the drawer—"

"That's where you're off the beam, Sherlock," Grady grunted. "There was no money in the drawer."

"That's just what I mean, Watson," Johnny Liddell countered. "There should have been. A big-time gambler like Johnny Carroll always carried enough cash on hand to take care of an eventuality like when the wrong horse won, and besides the doc saw the money in the drawer. That's where Carroll paid off from." He looked at the girl. "When you opened the drawer for the spray, I guess the temptation was too much, eh, Blondie?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Emmy snarled.

"Johnny Carroll standing there with his head thrown back; all you had to do was take the gun instead of the spray, and the money was yours," he persisted.

The girl got to her feet. She held her arm out to Detective Grady. Her face was twisted in a smile.

"We're wasting our time here, Sergeant," she said. "Let's get on down to the jailhouse where I can see my lawyer. I can't wait to find out whether it was in a fit of temporary insanity or whether I was defending my honor."

WHAT'S YOUR VERDICT?

BY LEONARD S. GRAY

There was no moon that summer night as Edgar crept toward the cellar entrance of his house in one of the outlying sections of New York City. He had parked his car a short distance away on a dirt lane that led off a seldom-used road, and he had travelled the rest of the way to his house on foot.

He wore tight-fitting leather gloves and in his pockets he had, among other things, a length of fuse and a short candle. These, together with some kerosene and wood shavings that Edgar had hidden in the cellar, were to help him commit arson — burn down his house for the insurance money.

Edgar had one tenant in his house — an old man living on a pension. But Edgar was sure he wouldn't be home tonight, since the old man had said he would be visiting some friends in another part of the city.

Edgar had been waiting for just such a night — dark, no one home, and a foolproof alibi that he had painstakingly worked out in advance.

He made sure that he wasn't seen; that the old man's window was dark; and that he left no footprints in the immediate vicinity of the house.

Though he used some amateurish methods, the fire was a success. The house was destroyed. All that was left standing were the foundation and part of the cellar door.

However, simply because Edgar was such an amateur, investigators had no trouble at all in establishing the fact that he had committed arson. From clues, it was a simple matter to build up an airtight case of arson in the first degree against Edgar. He was quickly apprehended and confronted with the evidence.

There was one more thing, though, on which Edgar hadn't counted. The investigators found, in the fire's rubble, the charred body of the old tenant who, according to Edgar's plan, wasn't supposed to be in the house. The old man had decided not to visit and had gone home to bed — to his death.

Edgar readily confessed to the crime of arson. But when a police officer told him that he would go to the chair for the murder of the old man, Edgar protested. He claimed that the old man's death was pure accident; that it was the man's own fault for coming back to the house; a charge of manslaughter perhaps, but they couldn't execute him for the accidental death.

Could Edgar be executed for the death of the old man?

What's your verdict?

ANSWER

Yes, legally Edgar could be executed for the death of the old man. Under the laws of most states, Edgar had committed arson in the first degree by wilfully setting on fire in the night-time a dwelling house in which there was a human being. And a homicide which occurs while committing the crime of arson in the first degree constitutes murder in the first degree — punishable by death or life imprisonment.

All at once, no Alice

Then the tension exploded. My voice blasted the quiet of the lobby. "I want my wife!" I yelled shatteringly. "Tell me what's become of her. What've you done with her? I came in here with her last night; you can't tell me I didn't . . ."

They circled, maneuvered around me. I heard the manager say in a hurried undertone, "I knew this was going to happen. I could have told you he was going to end up like this. George! Archer! Get him out of here fast!"

My arms were suddenly seized from behind and held. I threshed against the constriction, so violently both my legs flung up clear of the floor at one time, dropped back again, but I couldn't break it. There must have been two of them behind me. . . .

"Alice!" I sent it baying harrowingly down the long vista of lobby, lounges, foyers. I'd been gathering it in me the last few seconds while he was speaking to me. I got another chestful of air, tore loose with it. "Somebody help me! You people standing around looking, isn't there one of you will help me? I brought my wife here last night, now she's gone and they're trying to tell me she never existed!"

READ Cornell Woolrich's ALL AT ONCE, NO ALICE, a terrifying story about a man whose wife disappears — and the town that thought he was crazy.

AND MANY MORE—ALL IN THIS ISSUE

Verdict

JULY